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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Negotiating class, ethnicity and modernity: the ‘Malaynisation’ of P. Ramlee and his films

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Early Malaysian national cinema disseminates a social reconstruction process aimed at reconstructing Malay supremacy at the centre of a specific geographical, political, economic and cultural space. Aptly termed as ‘Malaynisation’, this process occurred during the Golden Age of Malaysian cinema through the films of P. Ramlee. While existing as a capitalist film culture located within an ethnically diverse society, early Malaysian cinema through Ramlee have produced a significant number of mono-ethnic representations solely focused on the culture, language and lifestyles of the Malays. As such, the articulation of the politics of inclusion and exclusion in Ramlee’s films articulates a right-wing nationalist sentiment that upholds the sovereignty of the dominant Malays while undermining other ethnic communities. The nature of these representations enunciates the context of an ‘imagined community’ which locates the formation of a particular type of nationalism within a social, political and cultural communicative space. This paper examines the construction of the ‘modern Malay’ identity in Ramlee’s films and the nationalist discourse in Ramlee’s films as an attempt at producing the idea of a nation as a continuous narrative of national progression by presenting the postcolonial Malays as a modern, successful and dominant force.

**Keywords:** Malaysian cinema; Malaynisation; inclusion and exclusion; national identity; ethnicity; modernity

### Introduction

The early 1950s till the late 1960s is often regarded as the ‘golden years’ of Malaysian cinema. During this period, one name stands out: P. Ramlee. As a filmmaker, composer, scriptwriter, singer and musician, the name P. Ramlee remains the most celebrated Malaysian film artist. His filmmaking career began in 1955 with his debut film *Penarik Becha*, and in 1963, he relocated to Kuala Lumpur shortly before the closure of Malay Film Production (MFP) in Singapore.<sup>1</sup> Before his untimely death in 1973, Ramlee had directed 34 films and acted in 26. It was also during this time that the nation underwent a transition from the preparation for independence to a new postcolonial country. One issue that remains unresolved during this period is the realisation of a multi-ethnic nation and formation of a uniting national identity.

Cinema constructs moving images capable of forming cultural boundaries and the construction of a particular national identity. This is reflected in Ramlee’s films and were used to convey the construction of a particular ideology. His films were used to construct the vision of a ‘modern Malay’ identity against the backdrop of an ethnically diverse

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society. This process of locating the Malays as the supreme ethnic community within a multi-ethnic geographical, political, economic and cultural boundary is aptly termed as 'Malaynisation'. The construction of such representations within this 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) is in line with the formation of a particular form of nationalism within a social and cultural communicative space. Within the context of cinema, Malaynisation was done through the significant number of Malay films produced by Ramlee with disregard to the ethnic and cultural diversity of society. The nationalist discourse in his films produced the idea of the dominant, modern and progressive Malays through the continuous narrative of national progression (Bhabha, 1990, p. 1). While it could be argued that much scholarship has already been developed about P. Ramlee over the years, much of it remain autobiographical (Ahmad & Harding, 2011; Ramli, 1998; Yusnor, 2000), without proper critical contextualisation (Adlin, 2007; Lockard, 1998; Mohd Hafiz, 2005), and descriptive in nature (Awang Azman & Khor, 2005; Barnard & Barnard, 2002; Chopyak, 1985; Hamzah, 1997). This paper presents a critical examination of the politics of inclusion and exclusion in Ramlee's films that articulate a right-wing nationalist sentiment upholding the sovereignty of the dominant Malays while undermining the existence of other ethnic communities.

### Imagining the nation and national cinema

The nation as a historical unit is fairly a new phenomenon (Renan, 1990). Some European nations exist as neither a coherent unit that encompasses a group of people sharing a common culture and language nor an exclusive political entity (Renan, 1990). The conceivable essence of a nation in a modern context is 'that all individuals have many things in common' while having forgotten many things (Renan, 1990, p. 11). The 'nation' which originally refers to as an 'ethnic unit' has undergone a historic transformation process. In a modern context, it stresses on 'the notion of political unity and independence' with 'the political' as the most important unit for it equates with 'the people' and the nature of the modern 'nation state' (Renan, 1990, p. 18). The nation according to Anderson, however, is the formation of a nation always reflecting its past (1991, p. 19). This allows the nation, nationalism and national identity to be examined in the context of cultural spheres as 'nationality', 'nation-ness' and 'nationalism' are cultural artefacts of a particular kind (Anderson, 1991, p. 4). Anderson further argues that cultural artefacts result from:

a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they became 'modular', capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety political and ideological constellations. (1991, p. 4)

Bhabha similarly argues that the formation of a nation is essentially a system of cultural significance that represents 'social life rather than the discipline of social polity' (1990, p. 1). As such, the public media should be included within the context of cultural signification in which the discourse of the imagined community is constructed. The nation within this imaginary context provides 'a secured and shared identity and sense of belonging, on to a carefully demarcated geo-political space' (Higson, 2000, p. 64). The nation provides individuals with specific cultural, economic and political boundaries and a social communicative space that maintains its existence. This imaginary space provides individuals with a sense of belonging as they imagine 'themselves as a member of a

coherent, organic community, rooted in the geographical space, with well-established indigenous traditions' (Higson, 2000, p. 64).

The Malaysian nation similarly remains imagined for it is divided without a cohesive sense of belonging or a clear sense of national and self-identity. Malaysia remains geographically divided into several political units with highly fragmented individuals and ethnic communities with their own sense of identity, cultural values, traditions, norms and dialects occupying different geographical location. The Malaysian nation therefore consists of various imagined communities uneasily forged by 'people in the tension of unity and disunity' through media coercion that naturalises conflicting ideologies (Higson, 2000, p. 65). The media therefore provides a social space to search for an accurate representation of cultural values and for the elusive national identity that continues to be negotiated by society.

The film industry in this sense does not articulate the discourse of the nation nor construct a national identity. While the convergence of capitalism and print technology has been instrumental in creating an imagined community and the modern nation (Anderson, 1991, p. 46), it is also in this context that nationalism precedes the formation of a nation. The early Malaysian film industry although having existed within the capitalist structure merely entertained the masses as it was controlled by the state through various laws and regulations. The notion of 'national cinema' becomes important within the context of the Malaysian film industry especially when the 'national' is concerned with 'the production, circulation, and consumption of the moving image' and 'are constitutive of the national collectivity' (Schlesinger, 2000, p. 20). As a result, the early film industry existed as a popular national cinema converged capitalism and the national longing for an identity. Films produced within such framework create imaginary bonds that bring together diverse groups of people as one single community by dramatising their fears, anxieties, pleasures, culture and aspirations (Higson, 1995, p. 7). While the Malaysian film industry exists as a capitalist and third-world cinema, it cannot be categorised as 'Third Cinema' for it is not a 'revolutionary cinema', employing 'guerrilla warfare' (Gabriel, 1982).<sup>2</sup> While the Malaysian film industry produces meanings and codes that attempt to criticise the existing social order without creating radical consciousness among the audience, Ramlee worked in a national film industry similar to Hollywood's 'unqualified assimilation' (Gabriel, 1989). This process only aims at entertaining the masses by creating profit-generating entertainment products (Gabriel as cited in Willeman & Pines, 1989). As mentioned above, the Malaysian film industry is a popular national cinema, and to a certain extent a 'Malay cinema' producing Malay language films in a multi-ethnic society. The subject matter and themes of these films are also merely about the Malays, while other ethnic groups remain underrepresented.

### **Malaynisation and the construction of an icon**

Since achieving independence in 1957, the nation has undergone various modernisation efforts. As it remains a very problematic process, declared aims of narrowing the gap of inequality in society has been achieved through subtle domination. Such efforts have been achieved economically through the New Economic Policy (NEP) and ideologically through the National Culture Policy (NCP).<sup>3</sup> It is through these policies that political domination has developed, enhancing the elitism of the economy and culture. In this sense, the Malaysian cultural, political and economic traditions cannot be viewed as

separate and autonomous entities but ‘as a culture of absolutism and domination’ (Kessler, 1992, p. 147). Because such absolutism and domination are excessively exercised, the construction of a dominant ideology in Malaysia must have been concocted from the culture of the dominant group. In this case, Malay domination in the economy, politics and culture has enabled them to develop a large, scattered but loosely defined Malay ideology. Given the influence of ‘Malayness’ in the NEP and the NCP, the term Malaynisation aptly describes the authority and dominance of the Malays within the political, economical, cultural and geographical arena.

It is in this terrain of Malaynisation that Malay nationalism has been invoked. Malaynisation is loosely based on the dominance of the Malay language, religion, customs and the daily cultural practices of the Malay, elements of the NCP. As such, it creates an ideological ground for the Malays to honour the legacy of their past in order to create a promising future. These influential factors behind Malaynisation further legitimise the process of Malay capital accumulation achieved through the NEP. Malaynisation therefore aims at creating an advanced Malay middle-class community owning a vast share of the wealth of the country, are educated and urban based. It is a social engineering process of creating the Malay man as:

a new man with new values, centrally hard working and thrifty, under firm leadership in an ordered hierarchy in which all know their place and accepting their role, playing their part towards the realisation of a good vision – Malaysia’s and the Malays’ rightful place. (Khoo 1992, p. 58)

The need to create a new Malay society of modern Malays living in a modern nation state has also witnessed the emergence of a modern Malay culture from the traditional rural Malay culture. This development can be found in the films of P. Ramlee as the central focus of his films was the complexities of the Malay society having to maintain the symbiotic relationship between upholding traditional Malay values while keeping up with modernity (Syed Muhd, 2005, p. 9). It is through the construction of a Malay imagined community in his films that the idea of the Malay society is invented and perceived through its traditional past. Such a construction creates ‘new’ political, cultural and economic expressions that combine states institutions and apparatuses.

The need to hang on to past legacy can be seen as a discourse of the ruling elite in further consolidating the growing middle-class culture. It is the middle-class that becomes the power base of the ruling party and where the elite gathers its support. This legitimation process in which a dominant social system is perpetuated through the cultural sphere is also where the political, economic and cultural participation of the masses helps the dominant social system to be accepted albeit through a limited and restrictive participation (Habermas, as cited in Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner 1980, pp. 16–17). The Malay culture is then ‘recaptured, revisited, defended’ – and in this ‘dislocation of modernity, the rapidity of culturally ungoverned advance, creates a disorder whose remedy, it is now claimed, is some reaffirmation of a past which alone can provide authentic moorings’ for the creation of a distinctive and dominant Malay culture and identity (Kessler, 1992, p. 135).

The traditional-future-nation state relationship on which Malaynisation has been developed was most profound during the 1980s at the height of an economic recession, political unrest and advancement of the authoritarian state. It is also during this moment that P. Ramlee became elevated as a Malay icon and legend. Malaynisation allowed Ramlee to be developed as the ‘myth’ of the modern Malay culture. In the context of this

myth, P. Ramlee the filmmaker, actor and human being became P. Ramlee the icon and legend. Malaynisation in this sense mobilised almost every element of the Malay social life, and Ramlee was seen as part of the larger framework of continuing the domination process.

The Malaynisation process needed an iconic P. Ramlee to liven up the culture. As radical nationalism after World War Two was simply limited to the literary and intellectual groups of artists and performers of ASAS 50 and Kampong Glam, the newly introduced Malay language cinema that circulated nationalist narratives was more popular amongst the public (Kahn, 2006, p. 117). P. Ramlee therefore made the Malay culture more contemporary and as part of a discourse to hang on to the 'great' and to mobilise the masses for its acceptance. The Malay majority public who were more responsive towards the nationalist narratives of the Malay-language film industry has facilitated the popularisation of P. Ramlee films (Kahn, 2006, p. 109). In this context, P. Ramlee became a conformist, or rather a means of gaining mass consensus for 'Malaynisation'. On the other hand, Ramlee had to submit the intellectuality of his work to this ideological discourse and became the victim of a dominant social system he tried to (a certain extent) criticise. As a result, there needs to be a clear distinction between 'P. Ramlee the human being' and 'P. Ramlee the icon'. His legacy continues to live on despite his death more than 40 years ago, and his popularity goes beyond a temporal boundary. His audience are made up of varying generations, from the generation that lived during the colonial period, postindependence Malaysians, Malaysian today and not forgetting his overseas following. He continues to posthumously gain a considerable amount of following and popularity, which has distinguished and honoured him with a collection of awards, medals, documentaries, tributes and a memorial museum.

The question that needs to be addressed is what makes P. Ramlee so popular? While his films highlight the pre-existing set of social conditions during the late colonial period, the construction of Malay-ness in his films were the product of a particular set of historical circumstances when rural life during that time was seen to be threatened (Kahn, 2006, p. 119). As a result, his popularity is directly linked between the larger framework of Malaynisation and the subject matter of his films. His earlier films dealt with difficult subject matter and issues such as class antagonism and poverty in the Malay society. The Malay communities in his film narratives were deeply divided along class lines and are framed with class divisions that separate the rich and poor (Kahn, 2006, p. 122). However, the resolution of conflicts in his films is very much confined to the scope provided by bourgeois idealism. In this resolution, which runs parallel to bourgeois idealism, every contradiction is resolved, as everything will be properly put back in place within a specific ideological position.

From another perspective, P. Ramlee did not entirely oppose the existing status quo. He instead enhanced it because of the constraints in the industry, or even because he himself was a bourgeois director. Since his films were constructed for the movie-going public and because the Shaw Brothers was mainly concerned in commercial returns, P. Ramlee as a filmmaker and entertainer merely construed and consumed the ideas of Malay nationalist intellectuals and politicians for his Malay audience and was not a spokesperson for Malay nationalism (Kahn, 2006, p. 129). Later on, the subject matter in his films has also changed, and it dealt directly with middle-class lifestyles, issues and values. This occurred after his relocation to Kuala Lumpur from Singapore. It was also during this period (early 1960s) when the ideology of Malaynisation began to emerge. In

this context, he was elevated from a humble 'working-class director' to a 'bourgeois director' whose popularity was increasing in the eyes of his political masters. These are possibly the contributing factors that made Ramlee a suitable candidate for the Malaynisation project during postcolonial Malaysia.

After his death, the revival of P. Ramlee and his legacy has become an ideological project. This process is akin to the need of creating a myth about the greatness of the Malay community as the main political, economical and cultural force of the nation. The definition of myth within this context does not merely exist as a symbol; it is also the embodiment of the meanings and knowledge that the myth is trying to represent. By reducing P. Ramlee to the level of a myth, Malaynisation therefore attempts to promote the cultural artefacts that greatly emphasise the dominance of the Malay bourgeois and its middle-class idealism. The knowledge behind the myth is really important because this myth contains norms, values and practices of the Malay culture (more accurately of the Malay middle-class culture). As 'knowledge contained in mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless association' (Barthes, 1989, p. 129), the existence of P. Ramlee in this ideological project depends very much on its function as a centre. It is in accordance with Malaynisation where this scattered 'knowledge' will be grouped, dispersed and digested by the masses.

While P. Ramlee's popularity appeals to a wide range of audiences, it can be presumed that his audience are mostly working-class given the nature of his subject matters. This is enhanced by the fact that the film industry itself is a popular national cinema. This is where the ideological content of a cultural industry matters the most, the grassroot level of the social structure in which the bourgeois ideology has denied the working class a chance to a better understanding of their position while further subjecting them to a continued domination process. The elite would therefore not allow a critical ideological stand to be taken in this form of 'populist' industry. P. Ramlee is however deemed as a non-threatening figure as he only 'flirts' with some sort of class-consciousness and never criticises society exceedingly. Repeated broadcasts or reruns of his films on Malaysian television (*Teater P. Ramlee* and *Teater Legenda*) allow the audience to 'decipher' the Malayness of this ideological project. This also allows them to vividly associate these Malay elements with other cultural activities and symbols that are dominant in the construction of the Malay culture in Malaysia.

The framework to decipher Malaynisation has been put into place by the ruling elite. It is already deeply embedded in the superstructure through the education system, religion and family institution. This is where and how the individual is hailed and interpellated into the ruling ideology and as a result legitimising the dominant ideology of the society. Malaynisation can no longer be understood as a false idea because it tries to promote a real relationship between the individual and the social system. The popularity of P. Ramlee therefore needs no introduction as his status has been elevated to a central position in the Malaynisation project. The significance of P. Ramlee in Malaynisation should also not be questioned as it has become part of the myth and after all, signification in itself is a myth (Barthes, 1989, p. 131). P. Ramlee's popularity among the masses and the state is clearly manifested through all the recognition he has received. What is hidden behind this manifested recognition is still debatable. This is where the idea of myth is important, because, according to Barthes (1989, p. 131) myth does not reflect a distorted view, and myth hides nothing; it signifies what has already been outlined by its meaning. In this myth, what Malaynisation also wants to promote is the idea of the man himself. In P. Ramlee is already embedded a sense of a legend, a Malay cultural activist whose greatness is beyond

doubt. In this perspective, the greatness of the individual Malay is very important, as this is the image that Malaynisation wants to project to the people.

From another point of view, the objective of Malaynisation is built in accordance with the aspirations of the NEP. The need to create a Malay middle-class reduces the NEP to a distinctive economic machine of the ruling elite and generates capital for the Malays in creating the new rich. This is the form of Malay supremacy that the NEP aims to achieve. Under the NEP, the Malays must become economically competent and occupy a central position in owning the wealth of the nation. This idea of Malay supremacy is then reflected in the Malaynisation framework. In this sense, the ability of the Malay community in having a cultural legend is equated as an ability to become economic giants. P. Ramlee is therefore an icon that conspires with the aspirations of the ruling elite. His popularity within the state is greatly verified when he was posthumously awarded one of the state's highest medals. This Malaysian version of a knighthood, which carries the title 'Tan Sri', was on the one hand in recognition of his contribution to the nation. On the other hand, it implied his iconisation in an age when most of his audience who did not even exist when he died. This is important as it is in the minds of the new generation that the hopes and aspirations of the NEP and Malaynisation rely on for continuation.

The spectre of P. Ramlee continues to live through this specific Malaynisation process. The Malayness in his films will remain central to this ideological project as it brings together the wholeness of the concept of a modern Malay individual. The classic realist narratives of his films not only depicted the struggles of the Malay community with modernity, they also shared a similarity with the elements of realism employed by Malay literature of the 1950s in depicting the majority of Malay men as economically and socially lagging (Syed Muhd, 2005, p. 9). Modern Malays should be educated (like the characters in *Bujang Lapok* (1957) attending school as adults) while being tough and smart (like *Harun* in *Anak Bapak* (1968) and *Osman* in *Keluarga 69* (1967)). Above all, they however, cannot be independent. This is because the Malay community will always be reminded that a liberation of the mind and independence from a dogmatic bourgeois ideology will result in a disastrous outcome. It is also stressed that the idea of the liberation and emancipation the Malay community will have a negative impact on society. This is reflected through the character Labu in *Labu Labi* (1962). Upon gaining his riches, Labu transforms into a giant who later threatens the equilibrium of the bourgeois hegemony. Labu's independence disrupts the continued domination of the bourgeois and ruling elite. As a result, Labu's physical and mental emancipation can only be achieved on the level of the unconscious. It can only be achieved through his dreams, as this is the only way he is capable of beating the social system in order to elevate his working-class status.

The essence in the films of P. Ramlee is not to perpetuate the truth or reality of the Malaysian society (class contradiction, inequality and imbalance of distribution of wealth). It is only a form whose meaning functions to outdistance the masses from the actual thing happening in society (Barthes, 1989, p. 133). Myth, as Barthes proposes is not a distorted view. As such, when myth becomes the weapon of an ideological project, it can be understood that what is being promoted and hidden by the myth is the real thing. Malaynisation is thus a project that promotes the real relationship of domination and subordination. It tries to create a superior Malay community while promoting Malay culture as the culture of society. Malaynisation and P. Ramlee work together in a structure-sign relationship in which meanings become exclusively mutual to the aspiration of the ruling

elite ideology. Even though meanings cannot be distorted, the interpretation of such meanings can be manipulated. This is why the subject matter of P. Ramlee can be seen as a form of limited criticism towards the establishment done within a specific ideological boundary.

In this context, the conflict between 'Good and Evil' and their attached meanings have already been framed. As the larger network of social superstructure in society determines them; P. Ramlee then functions to enhance this relationship. This is why the characters Galak and Jejaka in *Sumpah Semerah Padi* (1956) are punished. They are punished not only for their adultery but because their adulterous act has interrupted the stability of the social system and confronted the authority of the ruling class. Malaynisation therefore on one hand promotes a cohesiveness of society; on the other hand, it functions as a warning system to the Malay individual. Above all, Malaynisation aims at sustaining the social system built on subordination and domination. The Malay society does not realise such forms of oppression simply because their status quo as dominant ethnic group in Malaysia remain unaffected.

### **The construction of the 'Other'**

Although the Malaysian society is multi-ethnic, this fact is hardly represented in P. Ramlee's films. Quite often, other ethnic groups are represented through a narrow conception of stereotyped images deeply embedded within the social relations of ethnic groups in Malaysia. This multi-ethnic society remains a British legacy that has divided society by class and ethnic differences. Each ethnic community has its own distinctive history that differentiates one from the other. In this context, it is important to note that P. Ramlee worked in a system dominated by Chinese capitalists. The Shaw Brothers owned the studios (MFP in Singapore and then Merdeka Studio in Kuala Lumpur) where Ramlee made his films. Most of the personnel hired by the Shaw Brothers were Chinese from Hong Kong and Shanghai, but most of these films dealt with the narratives concerning only one ethnic community, the Malays.

In recognising that P. Ramlee's films for the most part only represented the Malays, the argument that can be made is that his films fit within the rubrics of the Malaynisation project. As P. Ramlee directed films that were part of the Malay nationalist project, his film narratives increasingly propagated images and representations of Malay-ness through a Malay ethnic-cum-racial exclusivism that circulated freely and openly (Kahn, 2006, p. 128). His films attempt to deny the colonial fact that the country no longer solely belongs to the Malays. Malaynisation therefore is a sphere where colonial facts become a colonial fantasy when the colonial past haunts the dominant ethnic community. In order to redeem itself from this undesirable experience, they are obligated of building a new society that locates the Malays at the pinnacle of every aspect of social life. P. Ramlee's films conform to this kind of ideological discourse as they project a modern Malay world. They hold together the idea of development and modernity with the Malays as the superior race capable of achieving a modern lifestyle, a sound economy and better social status. In other words, his films contain several discourses; some are neatly wrapped under bourgeois idealism, while some undermine other forms of discourses. The representation of other ethnic communities can be regarded as a process of structuring absences/presences or inclusion/exclusion. In a way, this representational system is a very selective process in which the Malays exist at the centre while other ethnic communities

remain at the periphery. Most of the time, the representation of other ethnic communities is confined to traditional stereotypes.

This form of ethnic representation works really well in P. Ramlee's narrative structure. In *Penarik Becha* (1955) for example, the ethnic Indians are represented, as money-lenders while the Chinese are urban shopkeepers. Further examples can be drawn from other films, in *Anak Bapak* (1967), the moneylender is again an Indian man and in *Bujang Lapok* (1957), the hawker is ethnic Chinese. Most of the women who work in the nightclubs are from other ethnic communities, for example, *Anak Bapak* (1967), *Labu Labi* (1962) and *Masam-Masam Manis* (1965). P. Ramlee's mode of representation is therefore closely tied to the concept of fixity, a concept, which according to Bhabha is an important characteristic in the construction of Otherness (1994). The nature of this relation is articulated through both the body politics of racial and sexual difference (Bhabha, 1994, p. 67). In the context of P. Ramlee's representation system, it can be argued that the 'Other' has become 'doubly Othered' – the ethnic remains at the periphery and the woman becomes the source of enjoyment and of iconic pleasure for enjoyment and consumption of the dominant ethnic male.

P. Ramlee's films paradoxically constructs yet at the same time eliminates and dissolves the Other into the main body of ethnic discourse in society. It is the body of dominant ethnic relations in which the Other is constructed through a specific ethnic discourse. Their presence is then either completely disavowed or becomes dissolved into the social, cultural and political frameworks of the dominant Malays. P. Ramlee's Other, it can be argued, is one of the legacies of Western colonialism. What colonialism has constructed is a form of ethnic relations based on the idea of segregation. This concept of divide and rule has located different ethnic communities into different positions of subordination and domination. In a sense, P. Ramlee presents in his films 'real' forms of ethnic problems that have been plaguing this society for centuries. This system in his films actually presents ethnic segregation as one of its major characteristics that conform to what is really happening in society. This is in line with how the cultural representation system in society works really close to the real social relations, as 'how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in real life' (Dyer, 1993, p. 1).

In this context, the existence of the Other also symbolises a castration threat to the hegemony of the dominant ethnic community. As the colonial legacy has demolished the confidence and dignity of the dominant ethnic community, a positive representation of the Other will only remind them of its colonial past. The Other thus becomes the impossible object to be treated with the correct representation in P. Ramlee's narratives. P. Ramlee's classic realist narrative however does provide some space and moments in which the ethnic Other is constructed. In this sense, the characteristic of classic realist narrative allows some form of exclusion and displacement. It positions and constructs the Other as consistent with the main ideological discourse of society.

The classic realist narrative argues for the conditions of representability within the system of capital. It argues for the erasure or absence of the 'real' conditions of existence. It is a kind of a formal model, which shows the structural work of the narrative form in relation to particular moments of history and culture. What is possibly representable is held within the limitations of any particular moments. In the case of Malaysia what could be represented are the conditions of postcolonialism, occupation, and anti-Communist struggle, but such representations are curtailed by the impossibility of concrete

representations of these struggles. What emerges instead is the struggle for nationhood held at the level of class struggles as witnessed in *Antara Dua Darjat* (1960), *Ibu Mertuaku* (1961), *Penarik Becha* (1955) and *Labu Labi* (1962), as a fantasy towards improving the conditions of the working class. This fantasy never deals with such 'real' contradictions but instead offers small improvements within the discourse of modernity. It is through the awareness of such impossibility that the Other is represented in P. Ramlee's films where the prime motive fantasises the building of a new modern and affluent Malay society.

In this modernity project, P. Ramlee only highlights the various social problems of the Malay ethnic community. As the rejection of the colonial past is important for the modernity of the dominant ethnic community, modernity and the denial of the colonial experience become the main discourse in which the Other is constructed. It is in the binary of modern versus colonialism that other ethnicities are represented in his texts. In the ambivalence of stereotype and its fixity, the Other is excluded and its importance in the history of the nation is displaced by the discourse of achieving what modern life can offer to the Malay society. In this modern world, what is important is the construction of the new and economically sound middle-class Malays. The politics of ethnic difference is highlighted as the main cause of instability in society when the actual problem is more likely at the level of class and economic relations.

The subject matter in P. Ramlee's films changed quite drastically when he moved to Kuala Lumpur. The issue of class struggles was no longer highlighted as his focus shifted to the subject of a family usually held within the context of commerce, the world of business, money and greed. Formal negotiations of difficulties are now negotiated between legitimate and illegitimate spaces. Nightclubs and events that occur in these spaces allow for the expression of desires and transgressions. Home is more a space for the expression of unity within the family where rules and desires operate. The formal divide between legitimate and illegitimate spaces allow for the family and domestic space to be never fully challenged. It is a space for debates and regulations as seen in *Anak Bapak* (1967), *Labu Labi* (1962), *Tiga Abdul* (1963) and *Gerimis* (1968). Everything magical, sexual and passionate occurs in the park and on numerous occasions in the nightclubs. In this construction of the modern Malay world, other ethnic groups have become excluded. The impossibility of representing a positive image of the Other dominate P. Ramlee's films.

From another perspective, ethnic relations in the Malaysian society pose a certain castration threat to the dominant Malay. Ethnic difference in P. Ramlee's representational system distinctly contains a process of erasure. The ethnic Other is simply absent or represented in shallow and typical stereotype images through the usage of the binary of active/passive in explaining this mode of representation; the active Malay and the passive Other. If the lack of penis in women brings out the fear of castration in men, the presence of the Other signifies the same fear of threat to the dominant ethnic community. In the discourse of Malaynisation, the representation of the Other can be considered as a process of disavowing the threat posed by the Other. It tries to reduce the significance of the Other for fear of the Malay losing its dominance and hegemony in the fields of politics, economics and culture. Malaynisation therefore functions as the main ideological discourse that guarantees the structure of presences/absences to continue through P. Ramlee's texts. This can be argued as the aspiration of the modern nation, or to be specific the modern Malay nation, is not just about being affluent but also politically, economically and culturally dominant.

### **Dissolving the Other and national unity**

Since 1969, the Malaysian state realised that its diverse population presented a number of problems. The main problem identified was the economic imbalance between the major ethnic groups. The state also realised that in order to build a modern nation, unity amongst the people had to be increased under a coherent social entity. The subject of national unity and national integration thus became the main agenda and most important goal to achieve in order to nurture good ethnic relations.

As greater emphasis is given towards the imbalance of ethnic relationships, inequality between the classes has been seriously undermined. The framework of this so-called national unity is still very much confined within the larger ideological discourse of the dominant Malays, as many aspects of their social life are incorporated in the national ideology as contained within the NEP and NCP. In other words, the move to incorporate a united Malaysia is more likely a process to dissolve or assimilate the presence of other ethnic communities into the dominant culture. A prime example of this form of representation can be found in one P. Ramlee film, *Gerimis* (1966).

Despite directing a total of 34 films, only this film deals with the issue of miscegenation and in spite of its low production values, *Gerimis* has managed to highlight this very sensitive issue. The film attempts to reach the core of ethnic relations by suggesting how such prejudice can be eradicated. It is however all too common for this kind of narrative to eventually narrow its focus onto the subject of sexual relationships. Instead of directly attacking racial difference on the basis of inequality, this film constructs and dissolves the Other in the space that is allowed by the idea of modernity in society. Because modern society requires a controlled relationship between ethnic groups, *Gerimis* therefore constructs its very own space where the fantasy of a modern nation can be achieved. It is within this space that projects the world of the characters from different ethnic backgrounds, Leela and Kamal from a bourgeois perspective.

The film also operates within the discourse of modernism. Both characters are therefore rich, well educated and from the middle class. *Gerimis* provides modernity some space, where the question of class conflict is displaced and some characteristics of modern life dominate the narrative. Because modern life is conventionally characterised by the construction of Westernised cultural practices, the nightclub becomes a symbol of the Western cultures, and the use of nightclubs becomes more consistent in P. Ramlee's later films. Even though the nightclub makes an appearance in some of his earlier films, its social function as a space where desires get expressed is become more prominent in his later films.

The problem *Gerimis* poses requires some space where it can negotiate the position of the dominant ethnic community and reposition the Other in a well-regulated ethnic relation as required in modern Malaysia. This particular space can be found in the world of matrimony. This is because a mixed marriage is considered one of the many ways of eradicating prejudice in ethnic relations. In the course of achieving this, however, the Other needs to become a conformist that conforms to the main ideological discourse. This form of system reduces the importance of the Other as only the Other is required to give up and lose their sense of identity and culture. It is also important to note that the construction of the Other is carried out through the main framework of ethnic integration. It is through this form of modern ethnic relations that requires every ethnic community to understand their function within the given societal space of politics, culture and economics. This therefore allows the sovereignty of the Malays, as the dominant ethnic

community to remain intact. For the Other, their existence as a specific cultural entity is no longer important as they are required to (un)willingly sacrifice their identity in order to achieve a certain position within the dominant social space. For the Malays, the whole idea of being a Muslim is also equated with being Malay. The newly converted has to adapt not only to a Muslim lifestyle, but it is more important for them to live like the Malays. The adaptation of a whole new lifestyle means that ethnic other is dissolved into the dominant culture as this is the only representational system that P. Ramlee's text allows to happen in its narrative. Thus, the Other becomes doubly other because the Other is a woman.

This happens to Leela when she marries Kamal. As spatial and temporal reality plays a vital role in constructing their desire for each other and when Kamal could not find any spiritual peace at home, he attains this at the nightclub he frequently visits. The nightclub provides a space for him to satisfy his artistic soul as it cannot be satisfied by the wealth promised by his father. In comparison with the other male patrons in the nightclub, he frequents the nightclub not for entertainment but to produce what he believes is 'food' for his intellectual mind. While other men busy themselves with drinks, women and entertainment, he concentrates on his canvas and uses his easel and brushes to produce images that represent his rebellious attitude towards his father.

In comparison with Bakar from *Keluarga 69* (1967) and Harun in *Anak Bapak* (1967), the nightclub presents a different form of space for Kamal, as it possesses some mystical element that builds him a fantasy world. He ironically frequents the busy nightclub as a sanctuary to isolate from everyone else. He constructs his own world in the nightclub as it is in this kind of modern space that satisfies his sophisticated and artistic soul. Like Kamal, Leela earns a living at the nightclub. She works as a professional dancer who performs 'traditional' Indian dances. It is in this specific modern space (where no religious and cultural barriers exist) where they first met and fell in love. Their marriage causes them to leave their parents. As a result, Kamal loses his inheritance as he has failed to abide to his father's wish of seeing his children being unmarried as long as he remains alive. Kamal struggles to support his family, as he does not have a proper job and his art become worthless as they do not have any monetary value outside the club. Their struggle becomes worse when their baby arrives.

As such, Leela's sacrifice and the idea that she wants to marry a Malay man is too much for her parents to accept. This is because she would need to change her religion and leave her culture. The newly converted Leela would therefore need to adapt to a Muslim and Malay lifestyle. This means Leela's assimilation into the dominant culture, as this is the only representational system that P. Ramlee's text allows to occur in its narrative. As mentioned above, the Other becomes doubly Othered as the Other is also a woman. Within the public space of the nightclub, the figure of Leela is gazed upon as images of her body through her delicate dance movements feast the eyes. In this particular context, the woman remains the bearer of the gaze as her own images and the meaning of these images remain coded into the language of the dominant patriarchal and ethnic order.

## Conclusion

P. Ramlee can no longer be regarded as an individual artist. His societal function is now part of a larger ideological project generated by the ruling elite. In this sense, he has lost his individuality by becoming part of the superstructure's machinery that groomed him into an

icon. His films enhance the Malayisation project that dominantly located the Malays as the ruling force that only benefits a certain fraction of society. As such, some members of society become marginalised, dominated and exploited for the creation of a selected few. Ramlee also attempts to maintain the discussion of social problems in his films. This emphasis has however been displaced from themes of the working class to the middle class and is closely related to societal changes. In this nation that is moving towards modernity, Ramlee's society is however characterised by the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Instead of properly representing ethnic communities, his texts however enunciate a colonial representation of ethnic relations. Although his later films provide a better representation of ethnic relations, they merely remain part of the dominant ideological discourse.

### Notes

1. During its independence from the British on 31 August 1957, Malaysia was then known as Malaya. The incorporation of Singapore and the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak on 16 September 1963 led to the official formation of Malaysia.
2. Third-World films seek to: decolonise minds; contribute to the development of radical consciousness; lead to a revolutionary transformation of society; and develop a new film language with which to accomplish the tasks (Gabriel, 1982, p. 3). The camera is likened to a rifle as the inexhaustible expropriator of image weapons and the projector likened to a gun that can shoot 24 bullets a second (Solanas & Getino as cited in Nichols, 1976, p. 58).
3. The 1969 General Election that led to the May 13 riots resulted in the ruling coalition needing to reconstruct a consensus to resume its dominance by reconstructing the economy of the country. This is done by introducing the so-called 'New Economic Policy' (NEP) in 1970, aimed at balancing the unequal distribution of the country's wealth among the people from a 4:33:63 ratio of *Bumiputera*, other Malaysians and foreign ownership to a 30:40:30 ratio. The ruling elite also tried to restructure the cultural domain of society through the National Culture Policy (NCP). The NCP introduced three principles that served as guidelines for the building of the Malaysian national culture: (1) The National Culture must be based on the indigenous [Malay] culture; (2) Suitable elements from the other cultures may be accepted as part of the national culture; and (3) Islam is an important component in the moulding of the National Culture.

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