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BETWEEN DESIRE AND HOPE: ETHNIC RELATIONS AND THE NOTION OF *BANGSA MALAYSIA* IN *GADOH*

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The objective of this paper is to examine the representation of ethnic relations in Gadoh (fighting), a film jointly directed by two activist filmmakers in Malaysia. Essentially, this film revisits the idea of Bangsa Malaysia, rendering this notion as something that is attainable; indeed, as evidenced from the narrative, the film presents the hope for equal ethnic relations in Malaysia as not just a figment of one's imagination but also an achievable goal. However, problems arise when the hope for Bangsa Malaysia is adopted unquestionably by the narrative of Gadoh. In this regard, this paper argues that while it is crucial to have hope for ethnic equality, and to sow this idea in the minds of the youth of the country, the film's narrative ignores the prickly reality that racism is not simply a discourse. It is an ideology that confronts Malaysians from all walks of life, and to eradicate racism requires a wholesale structural change in the larger context of society. Given the increasingly authoritative political culture in Malaysia, this is a tall order for a film.

Keywords: ethnic relations, *Bangsa Malaysia*, racism, *Gadoh*

INTRODUCTION: NATION AND CREATION

If the present social climate in Malaysia is any indication of the results of a post-colonial government addressing the issues of power and hegemony, then we can safely argue that the work of creating a nation by forging it from the ashes of a colonial state is nothing but a vain attempt to erase the trauma of being colonised. Independence and the later conception of Malaysia as a nation were initially seen as positive steps forward in the forging of a self-governing nation-state, complete with a diverse population who were able to identify themselves with the imaginary positions they occupied within the imagined geographical space of a nation.

Anderson (1991: 4) argues that "nationality", "nation-ness" and "nationalism are cultural artefacts of a particular kind". He asserts that cultural artefacts are

created as a result of a complex "crossing" of discrete historical forces; once created, these ideas become "modular". They are capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, and to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.

Echoing Anderson, Bhabha (1990: 1–2) argues that the formation of a nation is essentially a "system of cultural signification, as the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity". Therefore, it is conventional to include public media within the context of this cultural signification, one in which the discourse of the imagined community is constructed. Furthermore, it is also conceivable to define a nation in this imaginary context as "a secured and shared identity and sense of belonging, on to a carefully demarcated geo-political space" (Higson, 2000: 64). The nation that is being formed here is a space with specific cultural, economic and political boundaries where individuals are provided with a social communicative space, which in turn functions as a force to maintain the existence of the nation. Hence, this will encourage these individuals "to imagine themselves as a member of a coherent, organic community, rooted in the geographical space, with well established indigenous traditions" (Higson, 2000: 64).

THE FORMATION OF A MALAYSIAN NATION: POLITICS, ECONOMIC AND CULTURE

Although the post-colonial economy in the 1960s was thriving, segregation between classes and ethnic groups in Malaysia became increasingly evident. This uneven development and the unequal distribution of wealth can be traced back to earlier colonial policies, from labour and immigration policy to the land reformation policy. Official records show that the unequal distribution of income was a characteristic of post-colonial Malaya and resulted in the domination of one ethnic group, the Chinese, over the economy of the country.[1]

Consequently, the government focused its efforts on the economic progress of the Malays, the country's dominant ethnic group. This intervention resulted in the implementation of economic programmes whose aims were to restructure the economy by channelling more capital and aid to the Malays. However, the real inequality lay not between the ethnic groups but, internally, within specific ethnic groups. Jomo (1990: 9–10), for example, points out that the inequality of the distribution of income among the Malays was actually visible. The gap between the working class and the middle class was clearly shown during this period of time.

Claims of such inequity were denied and dismissed as unfounded by the ruling elite. In this context, "intra-ethnic" inequality was undermined and what was highlighted was the inequality between ethnic groups, especially between the Malays and the Chinese (Jomo, 1990: 144). The racial riot of May 1969 was seen as a result of this complex racial-economic interplay. After the racial riot, the Alliance, the ruling party at that time, needed to restructure the economy of the country by introducing the so-called New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970.[2] The main objective of the NEP was to provide equal distribution of the country's wealth among the people. The economic development programme under the NEP further enhanced the mixture of authoritarian politics with a state-controlled capitalist economy.

The core of this restructuring programme was, however, not targeted towards changing the economic relation between classes; rather, it was meant simply "to increase *Bumiputera* capital ownership and personnel shares in certain more attractive occupations" (Jomo, 1990: 154). Thus, this economic restructuring programme was mainly an effort to create and further enhance the Malay middle class and the Malay bourgeoisie's position by using the state as a mechanism to assist, consolidate and monitor the growth of Malay capital. The mobilisation of the state's infrastructure in the country's economy was done mainly to meet the demands and aspirations of the NEP, which tried to reduce the economic gap between ethnic groups. While the stated goal of the NEP was to abolish the "identification of ethnicity with economic function," in practice, the main objective appeared to be to restructure and increase the economic share of the Malays (Jomo, 1990: 154).

While restructuring the economy, the ruling elite tried to also restructure the cultural domain of Malaysian society; the result of this initiative was the National Culture Policy in 1971. The core of this cultural policy was based on Malay culture; as a result, this policy further enhanced the dominance and hegemonic status of the Malays. The policy ignited various disputes and debates, but for the past forty years, the ruling elite was adamant that Islam, the religion of the majority Malay group and Malay culture, be at the centre of cultural policy. These would form the central element of Malaysian culture which, inadvertently, resulted in the marginalisation and dissipation of other ethnic cultural practices.

The interpretation of culture in this policy is very vague. There is no coherent approach towards the definitions of culture itself, leaving the politicians and government personnel the power to construct their own interpretations and definitions of culture. The need to have a policy on culture was seen as necessary to avoid any racial tension in the future. The ruling elite believed that the 1969 racial crisis was also a crisis of values emerging from the existence of diverse cultural values and practices. In 1979, Ghazali Shafie, then the Home Affairs

Minister, was reported to have said that "Malaysians never learnt anything from the May 13 incident which among other things had erupted due to a crisis of values resulting from the existence of divergent cultures" (The New Straits Times, 1979; Kua, 1985: 13). Thus, it was asserted that more "common" and "standardised" cultural norms needed to be developed for Malaysian society to unite and to live in harmony. This need to create a cultural identity to safeguard the "values" of so-called Malaysian culture and way of life has, in the end, done more to undermine democratic principles than create cultural unity in the country.

First, this policy tries to assimilate other ethnic groups under the cultural hegemony of Malay culture. This aspect of national culture has been stressed by government officials as the most important element of national culture, and its authority can never be questioned.

The three basic principles of the national culture are (Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, 1971):

1. The national culture must be based on the indigeneous culture of this region.
2. The suitable elements from the other cultures can be accepted as part of the national culture.
3. Islam is an important component in the moulding of the national culture.

But, the authenticity of the three basic elements of the so-called Malay culture under this National Culture Policy are themselves questionable. The Malay are not a unified cultural group, so in terms of the National Culture Policy, the question remains as to whose culture gets privileged in this policy. Is it the culture of the Malays as a collective, or is it the culture of some fractions of this ethnic group? What is more compelling is the policy's static assumption of culture, i.e., the assumption that there is, and has always been, an "authentic" Malay culture.

Hence, by sidelining other cultural elements of other ethnic groups, the National Culture Policy can be regarded as a mechanism for the ruling elite to maintain its hegemony and the cultural status quo. The aspirations of this policy are then reflected in many other policies, which will further enhance the authoritarian status of the ruling elite and the state.

NARRATING THE NATION AND *BANGSA MALAYSIA*

After 53 years of independence, Malaysia is still having difficulties in defining its existence. When it received its independence from the colonial British forces in

1957, a nation did not form automatically (Ongkili, 1985: 231). In fact Malaysia as it is known today, did not exist until 1963 when Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak were incorporated into a new "Malaysian nation". However, as Gandhi (1998: 17) pointed out, "colonialism did not end with the end of colonial occupation"; it persists in the psyche of former colonial subjects. Thus in the process of building the nation, the state must first and foremost take into consideration the complexities of social relations created by its colonial past and at the same time it must confront the present post-colonial condition. Malaysia has tried to confront its past in order to address its present post-colonial conditions and for the past 50 years this has been wrought with difficulties with myriads of results and responses.

A diverse but united Malaya as envisaged by the nation's forefathers is clearly being put to a severe test at this moment. The post-colonial hopes of having a plural society based on mutual understanding are stretched into the imagination of the nation. This is the nation that is fast becoming increasingly centralised and authoritative due to the tight control of the state over the civil society and public sphere. As Norani et al. (2008: xiv) argued, 50 years after independence "a society of diverse compatriots who recognise and value cultural differences, many thoughtful citizens now felt, had yet to come into being; even more worrying, new obstacles to its emergence and flourishing that had not been anticipated in 1957 had meanwhile arisen, and were becoming even more central features of Malaysian life and politics". Several issues, such as the conversion to Islam and apostasy, the violation of human rights, banning of controversial films, and the banishment of journalist and citizens under the Internal Security Act (ISA), have taxed notions of cultural mutual understanding and have posed new threats to already fragile Malaysian ethnic and social relations.

The nation that is created out of the post-colonial longing quite often is represented as a discourse covering various social imaginaries. The nation, society and culture—the symbolic—become the subject of discourse that gets represented in diverse cultural artefacts. Films are part of these cultural artefacts bearing images, imaginations, metaphors and, above all the longing of a post-colonial society to erase its colonial past. Taking the cue from Anderson (1991) and Bhabha (1990), one must ask if the Malaysian nation, complete with its geographical boundaries, is, in fact, an imagined community. Then, the society it tries to create must be on the same imaginary plane; hence *Bangsa Malaysia* is nothing but a concept to consolidate the logical discource of progression of the nation.

Bangsa Malaysia as a term or a concept was first coined by Mahathir Mohamad, the former premier who, in the 1990s, put forth a challenge through his Vision 2020 for Malaysia to become a highly progressive and industrialised nation on

par with the developed world. At the core of this "vision", apart from its emphasis on economic development, is the idea of having "a united Malaysian which is ethnically integrated and harmonious, a liberal and tolerant society, in which Malaysians respect each other's creeds and customs" (Heide, 2002: 101). Mahathir Mohamad argued that the first challenge of being highly industrialised nation was "to establish a united Malaysian nation, with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made of one *Bangsa Malaysia* with political loyalty and dedication to the nation" (Mahathir, 1991).

In 2009, the present Prime Minister Najib Razak declared a rehashed and rebranded version of *Bangsa Malaysia* under the slogan 1Malaysia. Indeed, it is possible for one to argue that Malaysia's political scene is full of slogans. This 1Malaysia might be the biggest public relations campaign (of a propagandistic nature) launched by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) led government in the aftermath of the 2008 general election, which saw the ruling party nearly lost its two thirds majority. The ruling elite utilised almost every ideological apparatus and public avenue imaginable to get the idea of 1Malaysia across, from mass media to the education system. The thrust of the 1Malaysia campaign is the idea of mutual acceptance amongst the races and people of Malaysia, as well as a shared sense of nationalism based on the constitution and social justice.

The idea that a Malaysian nation could incorporate such ideal ethnic relations, however, is an imaginary one. It is inaccurate to define the nation as a unit of individuals with a cohesive sense of belonging and a clear sense of national and self-identity. This cultural fragmentation makes unity more complicated, especially when the majority "culture" share neither a language nor cultural practices. Thus, Malaysia, as a modern nation, is an imagined community, uneasily forging "people in the tension of unity and disunity", forcing individuals to accept conflicting ideologies and using public media as an arena to naturalise these differences (Higson, 2000: 65). The film industry and other public media systems play an important role in this equation and thus need to be discussed in this cultural context. As a social space film can be seen as a place where diverse and fragmented cultural values interact with one another, searching the correct kind of representation, which will never be achieved and will always be negotiated and resisted by the different fragments of society.

At the level of representation, a number of film texts had toyed with the idea of projecting a united Malaysian culture. In fact, P. Ramlee, the late Malaysian film genius, had experimented with the idea back in 1966.[3] One example of this is a film he directed, *Gerimis*, which deals directly with the idea of miscegenation.

Despite its low production values, *Gerimis* tries to suggest that racial prejudice can be eradicated. Instead of directly attacking racial difference on the basis of equality, this film constructs and dissolves the 'other' in the space that is allowed by the idea of modernity in society.

Gerimis requires some space where it can negotiate the position of the dominant ethnic group and reposition the 'other' in a well regulated race relations that is required by modern Malaysia. This particular space can be found in the world of marriage. Mixed marriage is considered to be one way to eradicate prejudice in ethnic relations. However, in the course of doing this, the 'other' becomes a conformist, and thus, their cultural importance diluted; that is, the 'other' loses its own sense of identity and culture in order to assimilate with the dominant cultural group.

Recent films like *Sepet* (2003) and *Gubra* (2005) by Yasmin Ahmad[4] tried to assess the present state of ethnic relations, creatively masking their criticisms towards some of the policies deemed as ethnically biased, and at the same time encouraging a much more harmonious ethnic relations in their narratives. These films suggest that the hope and longing for an imagined community need more than just a set of imagined textual representations in order for cultural diversity to be accepted as a tangible concept. Against this socio-political and economic background, circumstances that reveal the increasing anxiety of the nation concerning the issue of race relations, and by applying some concepts of psychoanalysis as critical theoretical tools, the film *Gadoh* will be critically dissected and analysed.

GADOH

Gadoh takes place in a school environment in which students from all three major ethnic groups in Malaysia come into contact each day. From the very beginning and corresponding to its title which literally means 'fight' or 'fighting', students of this school are not only divided by ethnicities but also by their abilities in learning as well. Thus, we have the "Chinese" group, the "Malay" group and the Indians who are being sandwiched in the middle of the collision between the former two ethnic groups. The intentions of the directors were quite clear; by depicting a social setting that resembles real life, the film elucidates a practice in Malaysian schools that has greater consequences for Malaysian society generally. By highlighting this problem, they ask their viewers to re-examine not just the school system but also the social system underlying contemporary Malaysian society.

In the film, the school authorities decide to create a drama club in order to curb the growing tension among the students; this drama club is made compulsory for the "racist hooligans" thus driving home the ulterior motives of the group's activities. Wrought with difficulties, the drama teachers eventually make the students realise the importance of their lives and their potential in the future. In the end, these students stage a performance that is meant to show the authorities that they have been transformed into good citizens, embracing the diversity of Malaysian society and the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*.

RACE, ETHNICITY AND TYPIFICATION IN *GADOH*

It is useful for us to examine the idea of ethnic diversity as represented in the film before we dissect the text. The effort shown by *Gadoh* in addressing ethnic diversity in Malaysia, recognising the differences and trying to offer solutions (albeit simplistically) should be applauded. This often dangerous and misunderstood field of ethnic diversity and differences is normally seen as a taboo in Malaysia. Most of the time mainstream media in Malaysia is guilty of highlighting the differences rather than informing or enlightening the masses about how to improve the situation.

In its simplest form, race can be defined as an explanatory concept for human kind to understand their condition of existence. In this context, "race" is not necessarily a pejorative term. This seemingly simple definition of race becomes complex when certain physical features, behavioural aspects and individual personality traits are linked together, thus influencing the way of thinking about ethnic diversity and differences (Downing and Husband, 2005: 2–3). Most of the time, these artificial categories and traits, now defined as "race", come to govern the way that people perceived both themselves and others in society. In a perfect world, these "race" associations would not affect the way in which people interacted, but in a complex society, such as Malaysia, where popular political discourse is often laced with negative racial undertones, ethnic discord seems inevitable.

In Malaysia, we desire a stable, largely prosperous state where diverse ethnic groups interact freely and without the fear that practicing our own cultures and religions will produce reprisals. However, on another level, racism is rampant; state sanctioned racist organisations, racial discrimination and racist politics are the order of the day. At least in *Gadoh*, this context of racism is not merely seen as political rhetoric. At the level of representation, racism is treated as something that is real and threatening. In fact, *Gadoh* makes the bureaucrats in the film (as the representative of the state) uneasy with its direct criticism towards the state's idea of what ethnic relations should be.

The tension between the ideal and the real in racial politics in Malaysia is the setting in which *Gadoh* was produced. The film's treatment of such issues and the dreams of changing and making themselves heard is, first and foremost, an attempt to rewrite the history of racial relations in this country. The issue is, though, the extent to which the narrative of the film accurately represents the complex nature of ethnic relations in Malaysia. Would it be possible for it to discuss ethnic difference critically, or would it necessarily be influenced by the idea of *Bangsa Malaysia*?

It is important to note here that, as a system of representation, *Gadoh* is also "guilty" of typifying ethnicity. Most likely, needing to accentuate realism and operating within the dramatic generic order, *Gadoh* had to project ethnic groups using a series of character types. It should be easy for *Gadoh* to highlight racial differences, as races have so many biological markers. However, *Gadoh* takes a longer route to discuss these differences. Biological traits were not used extensively to mark racial differences in *Gadoh*; instead, typification is used as a narrative strategy to highlight differences between ethnic groups.

These ethnic groups are represented in their typical socio-political and economic and cultural surroundings, each typifying their existence in multiracial Malaysia. These types are, however, cultural; they are imagined and constructed as much as they are political and real. Through media and visual representations ethnic groups are assigned traits that are not biological, most of the time creating an indispensable ethnic identification usually laced with negative connotations and meanings. Most of the time, ethnic groups are shown in their "typical elements", such as, for instance, the dominant middle class Malay surroundings and the working class or petty trader Chinese that further define and mark them as "Malay" and "Chinese".

OF PREJUDICES AND STEREOTYPES

A film like *Gadoh* is full of visual imagery. As part of a signifying practice, visual imagery is always imbued with the ideology of that particular society. As systems of signification have their roots in society, the meaning that is created from the signifier not only is specific to that society but also indicates that all meanings are being produced within history and culture (Hall, 1996: 32). *Gadoh* was produced within these signifying systems and the images it portrays are not just symbolic of the real condition confronting the society at the moment but also a post-colonial construct that is full of hopes and desires. However, the antagonistic relationship between the symbolic and the imaginary with the real makes the construct of harmonious ethnic relations in *Gadoh* a longing that will

never materialise, causing it to remain at the level of mere representation. This characteristic is clear from the beginning of the film when the longing for a united Malaysian is contained under the banner of *Bangsa Malaysia*.

First, the film narrates the idea that it is all too common for Malaysians to identify themselves as Malay, Chinese or Indian before they call themselves Malaysians. These ethnic and cultural identifications are deeply embedded in society. *Gadoh* depicts the ugly truth of social relations that most Malaysian would not like to discuss, that is, overt racial prejudices and harmful stereotypes. These prejudices become the subject matter of *Gadoh* in which the narrative core revolves around groups of students who are underachievers, misunderstood and moulded by the environment and the social system to become racist. The timing of the release of this film was not a coincidence. The story was created out of a realisation that a united Malaysian is possible although it might take a long time to undo 52 years of subtle racial segregation and discrimination. It was released amidst a number of issues concerning ethnic relations that were confronting Malaysian society.

Thus, as the characters are battling their desires to erase the racial blot that moves stealthily in front of their eyes, the narrative moves to the other extreme. The teachers that come in as part of the big Other try to separate and segregate the students further. Evidently, these students did not even want to be under one roof together, though they were forced to be by the school system. Indeed, they would not want to even be seen together as their souls are deeply embedded in the colonial state of racial relations. On the one hand, we can also argue that racial harmony cannot be imposed from above. Despite its noble intentions, the school gets itself entangled in a mess. The students fight with each other, in the school perimeter as well as outside until it became news. On the other hand, any encounter with the other is always a potential encounter with the *real*. Therefore, the students are projecting their inherent antagonism towards the *real* onto each other. In a sense the students are encountering their *real* but the *imaginary* and *symbolic* unity they enjoy is threatened by this trauma. They have to search their souls in order understand their mutual hatred, and of course, that is not easy to handle at such a young age.

What *Gadoh* does here is point out the difficulties involved in resolving ethnic tensions and the intense soul searching that is required for each of us to confront the real. The moment we project our inherent antagonism on the other, we demand that the other vanish from our sight.

RACIST BIGOTRY AND THE RITES OF PASSAGE

The immediate way out seems to be impossible to find as reflected in the scene where the teachers (they themselves are divided by ethnic groups, ambition and gender) were arguing. This is the point in the story when the narrative moves into the next plot in which *Bangsa Malaysia*, as a concept, effortlessly begins to be explored by the drama club.

When we were introduced to the main characters, we could perceive that these teenagers are drowning in the sea of racial hatred. Their souls are buried deep into this racial ideology, and they believe blindly what had been whispered and drummed into their heads about racial stereotypes and prejudices in Malaysia. At this juncture, a father figure intervenes, "transforming" the students attitude towards the real, slowly and painfully crushing the desire to erase the traumatic racial experience each one of the students has encountered in their lives. This father figure is none other than Azman, the drama teacher/instructor. This is happening when the real fathers, although present (but actually absent), did nothing to correct the deep racial hatred growing in these young minds. In fact, they are a part of the big Other who believes in the racist and discriminatory ideology that caused the racial divisions that these students are now experiencing.

As the drama club progresses the students discover what is lacking in their "new" lives—hatred for their classmates. The students begin to receive each other as human beings and not as purely as "Chinese", "Malay" or "Indian", something that is equally comforting and terrifying for them. Differences in terms of identity, culture and language will always be present; this is something Malaysians have to accept and live with. But, this film tries to argue that Malaysians can be united in diversity and live harmoniously while at the same time retaining their unique racial identities. This is the rite of passage that the real father would never assign his son to wade through as shown by both fathers in the narrative. The real father is, in fact, the metaphor of the social system that is racially discriminating and subjecting individuals in society to their assigned place and identity. Under the tutelage of this father, and this system, the students would learn racial bigotry and would become progressively less and less willing to accept the differences of others. While the imaginary are being cultivated and the symbolic were sanctioning the imaginary, the real is fast becoming a subject that is frightening and needs to be addressed negatively especially by the imaginary. The real refers to the inter-ethnic relations shown in the films. It is full of tension. This is like saying the tension in interethnic relationship shown in the film is strengthened by the imaginary and the symbolic which are inherently antagonistic towards the real. The moment we project our inherent antagonism towards the other, then we would want the other to be erased from our sight. This is what happened to the

students in the film when they encountered each other. This is where other ethnic groups are painted as the "other" or as a blot that needs to be erased.

Where the real father failed, the other father figure succeeds. Azman, the drama instructor, is not someone without a tragic past. The father figure in him is being cultured not by the big Other of society but from a deep sense of social responsibility that hopes for change to take place in the troubled souls of his students. Azman is the one who turns hope into action, pushing the racial limits to their boundaries and pinning them down once and for all when the students begin to see the flaws of their old ways. As a student, Azman was once tragically blamed for something he did not do, and he was punished because of this. He did not try to exact revenge, but it was gratified when he told the headmaster that he was the student who was punished just because the headmaster wanted to set an example to the others.

With this kind of story and narrative system we did not want to see an ending that is punitive towards the ideal that was being developed in the subject matter. As a matter of fact the simplistic nature of the resolution provided by the story will be easily accepted and would not be questioned by the audience. This is where the dramatic imagination of the post-colonial longing is romantically weaved into the resolution. This is the point where hopes and desires for a united Malaysia are fulfilled and where the majority of the audience will feel satisfied and reach catharsis. In other words, it is not a moment where we should continue our disavowal of the existence of the others. Ideally, the film ends with a happy ending that resolves all of the contradictions that disrupted the earlier equilibrium of the narrative. And, this is where the problems begin.

THE PROBLEMS OF *BANGSA MALAYSIA*

The film assumes that social relations that were, for the better part of 53 years of independence, part of an unjust and undemocratic system could be changed over a series of dramatic imaginings. Changes in ethnic relations would not come about without bigger and crucial structural changes in the realm of politics, economic and social of society. This is what the film is lacking. The film, however, is not to be blamed for its shortcomings. Within the limited space, it manages to argue what the most daring politician would not hope to say. Of course, the uncritical approach it has adopted can be easily forgiven and the unequivocal acceptance of the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* is something that needs to be critically examined.

Gadoh accepts *Bangsa Malaysia* into its fold without critically challenging the issues that were brought up by the term. Will the creation of *Bangsa Malaysia*

solve the problems of ethnicity in Malaysia? As the concept was presented in the film, it would appear so. But, realistically, such a concept will require a great deal of structural change in society to be successful. The point of "structural changes" is stressed here as problems of ethnicity in a former colonial nation like Malaysia must first come to terms with the idea that the existing ethnic relation did not develop naturally. In fact, the colonial myth, and both prejudices and stereotypes about race must be confronted and understood in terms of colonial history. These are real issues clouding ethnic relations in Malaysia, and they have their roots in the country's colonial past.

As a signifying practice, a film like *Gadoh* particularly succeeds in criticising the cultural and ideological constructs of ethnicity. However, the film does not aggressively question or challenge concepts such as *Bangsa Malaysia*; instead, the film enthusiastically constructs the idea of unity, in accordance with both *Bangsa Malaysia* and 1Malaysia without engaging them critically. The result is that the film will not be able to affect real changes in society. It must affect other realms especially the political and the economic as only a wholesome structural change will allow the dreams of *Bangsa Malaysia* as proposed by *Gadoh* to take place in the real world.

The sheer effort of erasing the denial is unquestionably a daunting task, a task that a majority of Malaysians would be unwilling to sacrifice, as it is easier to nurture the imaginary than to confront the real. This point is sarcastically provided at the end of the narrative when the representation of the big Other, in the form of the ministry official, expresses his dislike for what was being performed by the students that night. Earlier, the joyous cheers and applause from the audience in the film, and in the live audience in the cinema hall, place the characters in a very conflicted position. They are being framed in a form of double staging; they are being consumed by two sets of audiences, and the effect of what is being presented in the performance was lost, for, in that particular moment, there are excessive meanings being created by the film. The never-ending desires of *Bangsa Malaysia* put the whole early effort of criticising the existing status quo to a halt. The empathy later shown towards the idea of *Bangsa Malaysia* becomes an effort, and instead of questioning, it actually legitimises and sanctions the social order.

CONCLUSION

Gadoh reminds us of two things that Malaysians need to do in order to move forward as one united nation. The film questions our sensibility in maintaining a divided social system, and it pushes us to see that it is possible—not simply a utopian idea—for us to one day live as united Malaysians, with the shared goal of

a productive society where each individual is valued. Realistically, *Bangsa Malaysia* as a construct must be seen as part of the larger ideological discourse devised by the authoritarian regime in Malaysia. It tries to convince Malaysians that such a utopia could be achieved without a wholesome structural change in the realm of the political, economic and social structures. It is a project doomed to failure and if the current political and social climate is to be used as a yardstick, the effort of 1Malaysia is also nothing but a waste of taxpayers' money, but will definitely enhance the hegemonic position of the ruling elite that is being constantly challenged.

NOTES

1. The British colonial rule had transformed the traditional power structure in Malaya. The impact of such division of power left the ruling class without any specific political power. Furthermore, the economic power of this bloc who once controlled the royal courts and the economy of the nation was undermined. The impact of colonialism was profound when we look at the growing population of Peninsula Malaya, which was a direct result of colonial aspirations for the expanding colonial economy. British labour policy preferred bringing immigrants to develop the country's economy. Jomo (1990: 4) states that because of the difficulty of coaxing Malay peasants to work in capital driven enterprises, the British brought labour from India and China, thus creating a multi-ethnic but segregated society. The policy of "divide and rule" further enhanced the gap between ethnic groups in Malaya, economically and politically, and, subsequently, this lack of understanding between ethnic groups developed racial suspicions. In general, British labour policy created a multi-ethnic (but segregated) society, which in later years, would shape and condition the social, economic and political structure of Malaysia.
2. The Alliance Party or *Parti Perikatan* was initially a loose coalition between the United Malay National Organisation, Malayan Chinese Association and The Malayan Indian Congress and a few other fringe political parties that were organised according to and to protect communal interest after the end of World War II. It won the first federal election in 1955 and later formed the Malayan government after Malaya had its independence in 1957. The coalition continues to assert its dominance over the political scenario of post-colonial Malaya (Malaysia after 1963). There were moments when its hegemony was challenged (for example in 1969 and in 1987), but until the 2008 election, the coalition (now known as Barisan Nasional or the National Front manages to secure the simple majority needed in maintaining its status quo as the ruling government.
3. P. Ramlee was a film superstar whose popularity has an enduring power. He has been iconised and occupies a prominent ranking within the cultural structure of Malaysian society. P. Ramlee also occupies a very special place in the Malaysian film industry. In contrast to other contemporaries, he became the first Malay film director who was recognised by audiences and producers alike. There were others before him who had tried but failed to make any impact. Before P. Ramlee, directors from India and Philippines had dominated the Malaysian film industry. The emergence of P. Ramlee changed this scenario. He started a new kind of filmic experience: a realist film that was grounded on the life of banal people and the subaltern. He blended a mixture of realist elements within a specific melodramatic convention and composed his thematic elements in his own cinematic style. P. Ramlee died in 1973 at a relatively young age of 44. The death of P. Ramlee almost coincides with the death of the Malay film industry when in 1976 the studio culture finally collapsed.

4. Yasmin Ahmad was a filmmaker who with a few other young and aspiring filmmakers spearheaded the development of the new Malaysian Independent Cinema (circa 2000). Like P. Ramlee she died prematurely in 2009 at the age of 51 and at the moment when people began to critically appreciate the depictions of Malaysian lives in her films. *Sepet* (2005), a film by Yasmin Ahmad won the best film award in the 2005 Malaysian Film Festival. Its portrayal of a Malay family and inter-ethnic love affair and using three different languages is initially seen as being "unMalaysian". *Sepet* dramatises the inter-ethnic issues and the idea of Malayness that is confronting the Malay society. By doing that Yasmin was criticised because it did not represent the "real" aspirations of the so called *Bangsa Malaysia*. It also runs contrary to the images of national unity, the imagined community envisaged by the National Economic Policy and The National Culture Policy.

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