

### **ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW**

*120 Malay movies* (Second Edition) by Amir Muhammad, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Matahari Books, 2010, 432 pp.

To review a book that describes *120 Malay movies* to me is a painstaking process. I cannot imagine how the author—Amir Muhammad—watched, reviewed, and analysed these movies with such energy and persistence. Nonetheless, we can gain and learn much (especially to the non-Malay movie audiences) about Malaysian society.

In *120 Malay movies*, (hereafter *120*), well-known writer, director, and publisher Amir Muhammad reviewed the eponymous movies spanning the period 1948 to 1972/3. The book was published in 2010 and consists of 423 pages excluding the bibliography. It is neither an academic book nor a textbook about the mass media (film critique). Rather it is a book that captures the historical development of Malay movies and places them in a number of categories, namely, Islam/religion, ethnicity/culture, sex/gender, feudalism/politics, background events/ history, and geography/space.

An essential question that one needs to ask is how would *120* relate to the generations that have been exposed to digital video, 3D-movies, Crime Scene Investigation (CSI), Lost, Glee drama series, Japan/Korean pop, box offices, etc., and to get them interested to read a book that describes and reviews outdated, taken-for-granted, black-and-white, 1940s to 1970s old Malay movies?

The blurb of *120* provides the answer as it says that,

*"120 Malay Movies* is a romp through the films...Malaysian writer Amir Muhammad watched them in chronological order and responds to the stories in his own contemporary context...This book is a seriocomic investigation into how the iconic fantasies of the past might have unexpected reverberations in the present." (p. 1)

To me, this paragraph is the selling point of the book. It reflects the basis of the book and its "functionality" in relation to the readers' memory lapse about the past, namely Malaysian society between the 1940s and early 1970s before the 1969 racial riots and the political construction of New Economic Policy (NEP). Amir's reviews and brief descriptions of the movies as well as the film production information prompt readers to revisit the past in order to review what is now

taken to be (official) history and to scrutinise it in the context of Amir's alternative reading.

## **THE INTIMACY OF POLITICS AND MOVIES/FILMS**

The main theme of *120* revolves around the issue of politics. From Independence to the Emergency years till the post-colonial nation building phase, *120* has deftly used the movies to reflect the progression of Malaysian politics from 1940s to the present time. For instance, in *Penarik Beca* (1955), when Saadiah (the rich daughter) urges P. Ramlee (the poor trishaw driver) to attend night school so that he can become literate and improve his lot in life, Amir reads this scene to symbolise Malaya's pursuit of independence from the British, with P. Ramlee's character representing Malaya (p. 95). The reviews of *Cinta* (1948) and *Matahari* (1958) showcase the pro-establishment slant of the Malay movie industry in the 1950s and its unwillingness to popularise the ideology of communism.

Entering the period of independence, *Mogok* (1957) is a movie that reinforces capitalism as a viable economic strategy for nation building. As Amir points out, "*Mogok* still seeks to uphold the status quo: it's not the capitalist system that is bad, but there are sometimes a few bad people in it" (p. 118). *Sergeant Hassan* (1958) promotes racial harmony as the political agenda of the Alliance (now National Front or *Barisan Nasional*) rather than portraying the revenge of the former guerrilla fighters (mainly Chinese) against the collaborators of the Japanese (mainly the Malays), the movie "stresses instead the cooperation that would be valuable in the newly emerging nations of Malaya and Singapore" (p. 144).

The reviews of *120* on the feudalism of Malay society provide an interesting number of revelations. Whilst *Hang Tuah* (1956) promotes feudalism and blind loyalty in Malay society, *Sultan Mahmud: Mangkat Dijulang* (1961) contradicts this by explicitly marking the "anti-feudalist narrative in Malay literature" (p. 197). *Raja Bersiong* (1963), on the other hand, portrays Sultans in Malay Society in a negative light as they are seen to be corrupt. Interestingly, the review of *Dang Anom* (1962) clearly reveals homosexual orientations within the royal household (p. 224). In *Rumah Itu Dunia Aku* (1963), Amir brilliantly captures the heroism of both the commoners and the Sultan (p. 270). *Dua Pendekar* (1963) is telling as it shows how a dictator (not from royal blood) ransacks the commoners' wealth for his mega-project. It is obvious that these stories mirror present-day political scenarios, as white elephant mega projects in Malaysia are implemented by politicians in the name of nation building.

Another political aspect is the openness between sexuality and intimacy in Malay movies. Both *Cinta* and *Aloha* (1950) display "bare shoulders and thighs" (p. 35) and *Panggilan Pulau* (1954) manifests a sexually intimate and poetic serenade between P. Ramlee and Normadiah.

The best of Amir's political reviews is in his treatment of *Hang Tuah* (1956) and *Hang Jebat* (1961). As he reveals, the original *Hikayat Hang Tuah* epic shows the hero eventually becoming a mystic who was "tormented by his own compromised role in the feudal order" (p. 100). Amir also challenges the conventional view about Hang Jebat and re-locates the treason of Hang Jebat's to become a martyr (p. 202). Amir's review deconstructs the politics of UMNO's ethno-nationalism, which propagates Hang Tuah's quote "*takkan Melayu hilang di dunia* (the Malay will never vanish from this world)" to symbolise Malay supremacy. To Amir's view, "Malayness" and "loyalty" are not bounded within Malay society or culture.

Interestingly, Amir's review also provides non-political elements such as the "latent homoeroticism" of the intense friendship between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat (p. 101, 202).

To sum up, Amir's reviews on these two films challenge the audiences about the conventional image of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat.

## **RELIGION, SEX, ETHNICITY**

Was sexuality a taboo subject in Malaya? And was religion confined to a monolithic compartment? In his review of *Iman* (1954), Amir pointed out that it was common to screen images of the Satan, devil, or *iblis* because people "were less orthodox" in the 1950s (p. 84). *Noor Islam* (1960) was not a "*dakwah* (religious propagation) vehicle" (p. 188) but a showcase for a progressive view of Islam held by the commoners. In *Serangan Orang Minyak* (1958), Amir argues that the "story revolves around rape (or attempted rape)" (p. 132), even before this topic could be broached in American cinema. A bolder and cruder message about sexuality, intimacy, and gender is in *Kaki Kuda* (1958) which displays the "gender-bending and cross-dressing" (p. 138) of Aziz Sattar and S. Shamsuddin cross dressing as a woman to lure a man and sucking the man's thumb. In *Sri Mersing* (1961), Amir's review invites readers to consider the multi-facetedness of the concept of "Malay" and how different Malays in Johor and Pahang are from one another (p. 205).

But not all the Malay films were liberal or free from religious constraints and ethnic essentialism. For example, *Tajul Asykin* (1963) uses the stereotypes of Chinese as good merchants and Malays as peasants. Amir's review of *Isi Neraka* (1960) indicates the strong propagation of Islam. In *Sesudah Subuh* (1967) (as well as *Gerimis* [1968]) the film explicitly advocates the ideology of political parties for racial integration in Malaysia (p. 369).

The brilliance of Amir's review is that he manages to provide alternative ways to read the Malay movies. For instance in *Tajul Asykin*, Amir asserts to the readers that even though the film vividly showcases the economic disparity between the Chinese merchants and Malay peasants, he also reminds the readers that it "didn't seem to have undue political repercussions because the population was sparse and times were good..." and then continues "...would that last?" (p. 269). The second sentence challenges the readers to rethink the cause of Malaysian ethnicity issue whether it is economic inequality or political manoeuvring or both? Also, his review of *Sesudah Subuh* indicates that "the Malay language can be a crucial instrument in forging the much-hoped-for 'national unity', because it's *not the preserve of Malays alone*" (p. 37. My italics).

From reading Amir's critiques, readers can trace changes in the Malay movie industry. After the introduction of the NEP and the period of Mahathir's leadership, "Islamic resurgence was countenanced by the Malaysian government through its own Islamisation program" (Camroux, 1996: 855. See also Ahmad Fauzi, 2003; Martinez, 2004). FINAS (the Malaysian Film Board) and the religious authorities attained the power to determine how gender, religion, and ethnic relations should be defined. This was demonstrated in the censorship of Yasmin Ahmad's films *Gubra* (2006) and *Muallaf* (2008). Amir's reviews remind us that the political ambience was more liberal in the early days. The dynamics and vibrancy of the Malay movie industry were not determined by the politicisation of religion and ethnicity. What is Islam, what is body, what is gender, what is national integration: these issues were fluid and unbounded.

### **NON-LINEARITY OF HISTORY: DECONSTRUCTING THE OFFICIAL HISTORY**

Another brilliance of Amir's review is that he reminds the readers about the past and that re-reviewing old movies can be a way to deconstruct official histories.

In *Penarik Beca*, essentialist views contrasting poor Malays to rich Chinese are rejected. Instead, the movie shows the reality of intra-Malay class differences,

with Salleh Kamil's convertible representing the "uncouth values of a new age" (p. 94), in contrast to P. Ramlee's salt of the earth trishaw driver.

In *Noor Islam*, Amir's review indicates that the Malay movie has begun to challenge the role of the Sultans as upholders of the moral order. Islam was seen as a mode of resistance among the commoners to prevent the invasion of foreign beliefs. *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok* (1961) and *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (1961) showcase the different subjects of Malaysian society where issues of citizenship, women, ideas of liberation, are integral to our construction of history.

In *Serangan Orang Minyak*, a 1958 horror movie, an Indian doctor suggests that her patient, played by Latifah Omar, consult a *bomoh* (witch doctor) when "scientific methods" fail to cure her (p. 131). Amir suggests that in the realm of culture and media, "the world of rational progress can co-exist or overlap with that of malevolent spirits with no trouble at all" (p. 132). He reveals to readers the contestation between tradition and modernity.

One of Amir's techniques is to highlight the roles played by "minor" characters. In *Nujum Pak Belalang* (1959), Bat Latiff, a little boy who plays as son of P. Ramlee, devise strategies for his father's survival; or *Matahari* which applauds the role of women (played by Maria Menado) for her "gutsy" and "thrilling" arms struggle against the Japanese soldiers (p. 140). In *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok*, women *vis-à-vis* men are problem solvers in a rigid patriarchal setting. In *Noor Islam*, the masses are the agencies to spread Islam instead of the *ulamas* or Sultans. In the review on *Tajul Asyikin*, Amir propels the readers' perception that "[w]isdom is certainly not a royal prerogative" (p. 270).

In other words, while Malaysia was pursuing economic development to become a modern society based on science, traditions and old beliefs were at the same time at play in shaping the our history at the margin, if not accepted by the mainstream historical scholarship. The roles of women, commoners, and "little people" are also the agencies in the making of Malaysian history.

## **LIBERALISM IN MALAY MOVIES...1962 ONWARDS**

The review of Amir is best read linearly, from beginning to end for he has organised it in a chronological manner. Following the journey of Amir's review, one begins to notice the rapid changes in Malay movies starting from the early 1960s onwards. This is not to say that the earlier ones are less dynamic. However, from 1962 onwards, Malay movies began to challenge orthodox portrayals of stereotypical characters.

One example was in the characterisation of Sultans as symbols of morality. In movies like *Lancang Kuning* (1962), *Cucu Datuk Merah* (1963) and *Tajul Asyikin* (1963), the role of the Sultan is overtly cast in a less significant manner.

Amir also shows how language barriers were being crossed in this period. *Masuk Angin Keluar Asap* (1963) uses not the *pantun*-ish Malay lingua but the "Anglo-Malay" words used by the "unsophisticated" (p. 264) commoners in newly postcolonial urban Malaysian society. *Ahmad Albab* (1969) boldly uses the Arabic script to refer to the *kelab malam* (night club) whilst words such as *sial* (cursed) and *najis* (feces) are constantly being used in *Sial Wanita* (1969). Amir suggests that Malay languages have been treated in a multi-faceted and fluid manner in the Malay movie industry. Unlike the official adoption of Malay as a singular catalyst for social integration, the nuances of language (as shown in Malay movies) changes according to contexts.

*Kasih Tanpa Sayang* (1963) goes beyond the conventional morality of body politics to touch on the themes of adultery and incest, with characters "continually forced to negotiate and examine their desires, motivations, and prejudices" (p. 262). The review of *Bukan Salah Ibu Mengandung* (1969) shows the themes of Malay impotence, suicide, and a questioning of polygamy. In the late 1960s Malay movies toyed with the theme of nudity, such as is found in paintings of nudes in *Bukan Salah Ibu Mengandung* and *Sial Wanita*. More boldly, a naked back of a woman patient was screened in *Dr. Rushdi* (1970) and the dialogue of a sexually frustrated woman to P. Ramlee (p. 402, 403). *Gelora* (1970) displays the "underwear-clad and towel-clad female flesh" (p. 405) and narrates the theme of incest (also in *Kalung Kenangan* [1964]).

## **TRANS-NATIONALISM OF MALAY INDUSTRY**

Amir's review reveals to readers the regional outlook of the Malay movie industry. For instance in their production of *Nora Zain Agen Wanita 001* (1967), The Shaw Brothers attempted to expand Malay movies into regional markets between Hong Kong and other parts of Southeast Asia. The presence of Filipino actors and directors such as Ramon A. Estrella, director of *Matahari* (1958); Lamberto V. Aellana, director of *Sergeant Hassan* (1958); and K. M. Basker (Malaya-born but India-trained), director of *Miskin* (1952) and *Hati Iblis* (1953) among others; and Maria Menado, a Filipina actress who appeared in many movies is evidence of the trans-border and trans-national characteristics of Malay industry.

One wonders what happened to today's Malay (especially mainstream) movie industry and the connectivity between the larger East Asian and Southeast Asian? Increasingly, we see Malaysian (Chinese) singers and actors moving to Taiwan and China to seek cultural mileage and market. We rarely find cultural exchanges between the different nationalities of artists within the Nusantara region as in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

### **LIMITATIONS WITH THE INTENTION TO INSTIGATE**

There are lots of compilations of short reviews by film critics so the review of *120* by Amir is not unusual. It is a political review by a politically aware commentator. As such, it is slanted towards a specific perspective. Amir does not give us alternative readings of the movies he viewed and, indeed, that is not his goal. Readers wishing for such an alternative will want to look elsewhere.

Amir's tendency to review the movies with the stars' real names, to the readers that are not familiar with Malay movies, is difficult to follow.

In *Musang Berjanggut* (1959), *Nujum Pak Belalang* (1959), *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (1961), Amir's reviewing style of constantly shifting between one movie and the other might be confusing. More confusing is that Amir is engaged in a conversation that seems to exclude the reader.

The linking of films to history sometimes becomes far-fetched. This is clearly shown in the irrelevance of *Bukan Salah Ibu Mengandung* (1969) to the 1969 racial riots. Examples like this one leave the reader wondering whether Amir has correctly identified the intentions of the original filmmakers. Perhaps another book focusing on the production of these films may fill this gap.

I suspect this is Amir's intention: to invite if not to compel readers to find out more about the politics of and the going-ons behind the movies. The limitations of Amir's reviews provide readers such space to reflect, to investigate, to quarrel with the author, to view historical taken-for-granted with new eyes, and to interrogate present-day political constructions of sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and history.

### **TO SUM UP**

On the one hand, Amir showcases the politics of the movie industry and its ability to propagate themes such as pro-British messages, ignoring communism,

and the maintenance of the feudalistic order and Islam. On the other hand, Amir also shows how Malay movies have (especially since the early 1960s) have become more sophisticated critiques of the politicisation of the feudal order, Malay languages, and racial integration. The reviews uncover the ways in which Malay movies deconstruct the official history, manifest the fluidity of Malaysian society such as the complexities of Malay languages and Islam, explore sexual politics and intimacy, and re-produce the role of subalterns in history.

I suspect that Amir's critical reviews of Islam, ethnicity, gender, feudalism or more specifically issues dealing with *khalwat*, *hudud*, the NEP, the 1969 racial riots, and the roles of the Sultan earlier, derive from frustration with the over-emphasis and exaggeration of these social norms in contemporary Malaysian society. The movies are a mirror into society for Amir: by carefully unpacking the messages in the movies, he uncovers a different reality and reflects it back to his readers. As he states, "real life and reel life can't be separated" (p. 94). This book convincingly shows us that these black-and-white Malay movies do have a significant role to play, not just to entertain us, but to reveal alternate histories of the past.

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