

Power, *Adat*, and Popular TV Fiction Imaginary

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ABSTRACT

Research by Smith (2010) has shown that one of the implications of culture is the expansion of power. This paper explores how power is legitimized through the idealizing of Malay adat (customs) by the “dominant knowers” in Malaysia’s popular TV fiction. Based on Conversation Analysis of selected narrative exchanges in Julia and On Dhia, dominant knowers prevail in conflicts using adat-related reasons in instituting the roles of women and men in everyday discourses. While Malay women attempt to establish themselves as the dominant knowers by using logic, their logic is turned down whereas in scenes where women are hardly given any chance of a voice, they are made invisible through mere sighs as if they have been pushed to a position where they lack personal choices. By focusing on TV fiction’s narrative exchanges, we ultimately unveil that although TV fiction is broadcast in times of modernity, Malay adat is still legitimate for expanding power and authority in everyday unconscious experience.

Keywords: Narrative exchange, popular TV fiction, malay adat, power, popular culture

INTRODUCTION

Two popular television (TV) fiction, *Julia* and *On Dhia* are two of arguably the most popular TV fiction in Malaysia. Set and broadcast in 2012, they grace the market with over 1.5 million audiences (Media Prima, 2012), grossing over 11 million audiences in 2013 (Media Prima, 2013), including additional reruns (Tonton, 2013). *Julia* revolves around a story of the main protagonist- Julia. Issues on *Julia* begins to transpire when Julia fetishizes the idealizing of being modern and educated through pursuing her degree, who is at the same time constrained by Malay tradition, a vision by Julia’s parents to have Julia become a rural-raised, modest Malay girl. Not only is this power struggle of becoming and not becoming Malay plays out between Julia and her parents, such contestation between conforming to her individual preferences and *adat* also results in bitter relationships between Julia and her prospective suitor. *On Dhia* deals simultaneously with gender relations and personal predicaments, where parents of the main protagonist- Dhia, expect Dhia to conform to certain gender imaginations; through living by the Malay *adat*, clashing with Dhia’s everyday personal desires. This discord between Dhia and her prospective fiancé (Rafie) also results in a heartbreaking love life that eventually ends in frustration and early marriage separation due to different social statuses and gender issues. Because of these recurring issues in both *Julia* and *On Dhia*, they suggest a need to explore how power prevails in TV fiction.

The present study attempts to address this gap of how Malay *adat* has been used to maintain power, authority and position in TV fiction’s narrative exchanges, and in particular, draws upon Bourdieu’s and Foucault’s theories. The motivation for Foucault’s power and Bourdieu’s symbolic order are that the potential employment of Malay *adat* is often discursive and dependent on the socio-cultural knowledge available to the Malay world.

Considering this background of socio-cultural knowledge of Malay *adat*, this variability of socio-cultural background contributes to a better understanding of the everyday, embodied, unconscious experience of power-related issues as expressed in TV fiction. Our central thesis is that although modernity and media terrains have experienced shifts in cultural foci, power and position in everyday narrative exchanges shown on TV fiction is still dominant through idealizing Malay *adat* (customs). In this study, we focus on Malay in Malaysia as a plethora of "factors are intimately linked and infect each other in the process of Malay identity formation" that "they may appear to be mutually exclusive where one may exclude or preclude the other." (Jerome, 2013: 131).

In what follows, Foucault's concept of power and knowledge will firstly be highlighted. By connecting these notions to Malay *adat*, we display the stereotypical framework within which Malay *adat* plays out in the discourse roles, signifying who has a leading role in what and who complies to Malay *adat* more on *Julia* and *On Dhia*. Next, we link Bordieu's notion of symbolic order to show the potential aspect of power that broadens the cleavages of legitimacy and hegemony on TV fiction. That being elaborated, we also want to review the connection between TV fiction and Malaysia chant as well as mediascape in order for us to contextualize the present analysis. By doing so, we contend that the issue of power, position, and legitimacy in TV fiction cannot be interpreted without making use of the many nuances and practices in the media spheres. After we analyze the corpus, we reveal the disproportionate power made available through the dynamic use of Malay *adat* in the narrative exchanges. As an outcome of the article, a summary is presented.

MALAY ADAT

Taib (1974) has suggested the interaction between Islamic tradition with traditional beliefs and scientific inquiry forms Malay *adat*. It suggests that the concept of *adat* revolves around the assimilation between various religious and socio-cultural concepts. In his article, "Malay Behaviors," Mat Saad Baki (1993) highlights some of the beliefs surrounding the Malay world. Malays, firstly, want to live in harmony with others (Provencher, 1972). The harmonious lifestyle is imperative in that any subjects attempting to disrespect the Malay *adat*, which is akin to an "attack" on the older generation (Banks, 1976), will be sanctioned. In other words, the Malays would keep disagreements to the self, without going against the status quo or the hierarchical structure. For instance, children not arguing with parents or wives conforming to husbands can represent adherence to the hierarchical structure of Malays. In another illustration, Malay *adat* holds that it is necessary not to challenge anything that is prescribed by religion. It is this silencing of one's personal voices that somewhat results in marginalization and power struggles in their everyday unconscious encounters (Idrus et al., 2014).

Secondly and most importantly, the socio-cultural worldview of Malay *adat* also suggests that gender politics are present. Specifically, Malay women are not expected to question principles appropriated to them by men. For instance, Ong (1990), in her anthropological study has observed that Malay women should accept any position and in one illustration, disagreement against Malay men means "resistance against Allah giveth" (24). Although this is one of the instances representing the relationship between Malay *adat* and women, the question of gender politics remains relevant and entrenched, confirming the patriarchal elements in a typical family beliefs and realities (Zainal, 1995). The innate relationship between *adat* and gender politics has also vastly been documented elsewhere (see Ruzy, 2003 for example) but that is not the central focus of these pages. The establishment of the link between *adat* and gender relations is to show that we are fully aware that the two exist alongside each other.

POWER, NARRATIVE EXCHANGE, AND TV FICTION

Our analysis has a point of reference to Michael Foucault's work. Foucault (1978) emphasizes the links between power, knowledge, and practices, moving away from a conception of power from mere repression to variations of power exercised in social lives. In that sense, Nealon (2008: 24) summarizes Foucault's work:

"Foucauldian power is not something held but something practiced; power is not imposed from "above" as a system or *socius*, but consists of a series of relations within such a system or *socius*..."

Thus, knowledge is percolated through discursive practices, serving as a tool for maintaining power. In doing so, social representations that are formed are not simply witnessed as innate, but rather systematically governed to dominate one's understanding. This is the kind of concept TV fiction in the likes of *Julia* and *On Dhia* glamorize. The conforming and dissenting Malay *adat* discourses are shown as part of the sites for dominant knower to establish his or her argumentation. This argumentation, as we shall witness, encompasses "multiplicity of levels and modes of exercise of power in social life" (DeFina & Georgakopolou, 2012: 126), one that includes adherence to social status and hierarchical structure. By using Foucauldian power as a lens for scrutiny, it magnifies how power in TV fiction's narrative exchanges is legitimized through Malay *adat*.

Another fundamental concept useful for discussing power and position on *Julia* and *On Dhia* develops from Bourdieu's (1977) notion of symbolic order. Within this notion, symbolic order for production and reception of meaning constitutes power. Or in other words, symbolic order involves a powerful person or criteria delineating and redelineating one's social structure through discourse exchanges. In the TV fiction, various ways that include, but are not limited to exchanges prescribing dress, customs, language, and rituals reveal the representations that are entrenched and sustained. By using Bourdieu's line of thought, one surmises the struggles to either remain powerless and voiceless or strong and empowered.

However, critics aver that Foucault's and Bourdieu's notions of power within the discourse of society at times are viewed as too extreme and far-fetched. But this is not our position. Instead, we argue that they provide spaces for addressing the dynamics of power relations between who conform to and dissent Malay *adat* in *Julia*'s and *On Dhia*'s narrative exchanges.

POWER AND MALAYSIA'S MEDIASCAPE

Having delineated the above trajectory, we now contextualize TV fiction works in Malaysia. Although the following form of contextualization is confined to select time periods, it has a place in understanding the forces and acts that legitimize Malay *adat* in narrative exchanges.

The Gatekeepers

The government, through RTM, has established a five layer gatekeeper (Siti Zanariah 2011). Formed initially through the integration of media and government (Nain, 1991, 2002; Wang, 2001), the five layers include the film censorship board (FCB), governmental agencies (The Ministry of Home Affairs for example), the television itself, the mass media laws and the prime minister of Malaysia. The five layers of forces have tasks before them (Foo, 2004; Siti Zanariah, 2011) that includes receiving, screening, legalizing, and broadcasting TV fiction.

Despite these controls by RTM, TV stations have resisted these forces. This is likely due to the cultural changes (elimination of the Malay quota) in the recent telecommunications, and media industry act and in line with the 1Malaysia chant. In 1970, three codes were formulated with regard to the regulations of TV works by RTM but today, these codes have changed. Of concern are the following specific changes to the mission of the RTM that have led to an observation of new realities of culture:

1970: To assist in promoting civic consciousness and in fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture (McDaniel, 1994)

2013: Becoming a pioneering nation builder through broadcasting service in upholding the 1Malaysia concept (RTM, 2013) and;

1970: To provide suitable elements of education, general information and entertainment (McDaniel, 1994)

2013: Benefiting information technology and new media ideas for the public maximum viewers (RTM, 2013)

Observe the differences of the foci used. In the first objective, “civic consciousness” has been modified with “pioneering nation”, suggesting a shift in focus from postcolonial Malaysia to a modern Malaysia; “Malaysian arts and culture” has now been changed to “1Malaysia” which in turn, signals diversity, irrespective of a single domination of cultural entity. Moreover, in the second objective, “suitable” and “general” have both been shifted to “benefiting” and “new” respectively, indicating welcoming gestures to new cultural reality such as those representing sin and taboo. The resulting increase in more visible TV fiction assimilating Western and modern-Asian themes can attest to this phenomenon. Kim’s (2010) study, is one example of research where a number of popular TV fiction in Malaysia now reflects the melting of “other” TV fiction. For instance, the popularity of American TV fiction *Ugly Betty* has led to the production of *Manjalara*, grossing over 1.8 million audiences each episode (Budiey, 2010).

It is here where the crises that we observe begin to transpire. While embracing diversity by adopting “other” or foreign TV fiction, the TV fiction studied, however, will show that some narrative exchanges still rely on the authorial discourses of Malay *adat*.

METHODOLOGY

We attempt to construct the ideology of hegemony and authority of Malay *adat* and being Malay-Muslims through conversation analysis (CA) (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008), exposing the wider frame of “systems of values and beliefs” (DeFina & Georgakopolou, 2012:71). We, therefore, depart from using semiotic analysis and historiographic methods but focus on the role of textual data instead. By choosing to scrutinize selected scenes of *Julia* and *On Dhia*, we are opened to the realm of power struggles that answer the questions, “Who is the authority?” and “How does the authority maintain his or her position?” Because of this sheer popularity, airing reruns on the same network and making them available online (Tonton, 2013) can be seen. But as argued earlier, we aim to describe and not generalize this issue across all other TV fiction. This means that while TV fiction shows issues that are decidedly liberal, social and political, we also focus on powerful and authorial discourses. By displaying such issues, we highlight discursive frameworks that legitimize the position of *adat* as a powerful tool in everyday conversation exchanges.

In elaborating the questions of power, questions on who and how one holds authority are central. These are important for exploring self-legitimization. Briggs (1996), for instance, has

argued that successful patternings of rhetorical and linguistic structures construct the authoritative discourse of the people in the positions of power. Some of these structures include the use of specific lexical items, and recourse to words, phrases, and expressions linked to a “specific field of knowledge to which only individuals in a position of power” index “authority” (DeFina & Georgakapolou, 2012:71). This is the kind of argument that TV fiction like *Julia* and *On Dhia* explores. The repetitive moving back-and-forth using the discourse of Malay *adat* instead of logic is resonant in the scenes. In *Julia*, this is the kind of exemplification shown when Julia wants to pursue the relationship with Amir and her relationship application is denied by her own father who argues along the lines of being Malay-Muslims and Malay culture, although the issue at hand is considered personal or private. By using CA, we show how Malay *adat* discourse works in maintaining the status quo of the dominant “knower.”

Critics aver that CA has several weaknesses. They maintain that there is no way to systematize generalization in narrative exchange that can be gained from fine-grained analysis. Other critics argue that the extent to which we know that the discourse is imposed onto the participant structures and individual strategies is unknown. Our argument is that the work in narrative structure can present a more specific study that forms the larger part of social practices. In our study, this is the kind of analysis that uncovers issues concerning the unconscious, everyday Malay social practices. Although critics argue that there is no “yardstick” to measure participant structures and individual strategies, CA’s specific coding categories can be used as a systematic set of discourse elements in our quest to uncover the discourses used to maintain power on TV fiction.

ANALYSIS

Power, *Adat*, and Gender Relations

In the following exchanges, conflicts take turns to escalate when gender figures as the central question. It all transpires when the main protagonists in *On Dhia*; Dhia and Rafie meet Dhia’s father at the school gate. Furious after seeing Rafie and Dhia walking and holding hands at the same time, Dhia’s father scolds and reminds Rafie that only girls can befriend Dhia. Having made aware of this regulation, Rafie returns to Dhia’s house the next day. However, Rafie’s presence comes out as a surprise for both Dhia and her father as Rafie dresses up as a girl, literally following Dhia’s father’s line of thought, where only girls could be with Dhia. With Rafie standing in front of Dhia’s house in a mini-skirt, Dhia’s father observes Rafie’s presence from his living room. Table 1 illustrates the discourse exchanges:

Table 1. Power, *adat*, and gender relations

1	Rafie:	<i>Assalamualaikum</i> ((wears a girl’s skirt)). <i>Makcik, pakcik, saya Rafie::</i>
2		<i>dan saya kawan Dhia.</i> ((gleefully smiling))
3		<i>Assalamualaikum.</i> Uncle, aunt, I’m Rafie and we go to school together.
4		
5	Dhia’s father:	((peeps through windows))° <i>Main kan aku, ya, dia mainkan aku.</i> °
6		You twist my word, boy. You are going to get it.

7

8 Dhia's mom: *<Ish, kan abang sendiri yang cakap.*

9 Well, that's what you said to him before- only girls can be with Dhia.

10

11 Dhia's father: *<memang lah aku yang cakap. Dhia tak boleh berkawan selain daripada*
12 *perempuan. Dia tu apa? Lelaki ke perempuan? Yang dia duduk gatal*
13 *pakai baju perempuan tu pasal apa. Tak tahu ke haram lelaki pakai baju*
14 *perempuan?*

15 Yes, I did. I had meant literal meaning of "girls," not figuratively by cross-
16 dressing. And why is he wearing a girl's dress for? Doesn't he know
17 that Islam forbids guys from cross-dressing?

18

19 Dhia's mom: *<Bang, biarlah diaorang tu berkawan, bang. Hey, dia berkawan dah lama*
20 *dah bang, sejak darjah satu. Tengok takde papa, elok je:: takde gaduh*
21 *takde apa. °Abang pulak carik pasal.°*

22 Let them be. They have been together long enough; since the first grade
23 I don't see anything wrong so far, no fights whatsoever, but why are you
24 meddling in their business for?

25

26 Dhia's father: *Saya carik pasal? Saya yang carik pasal? Alisa, awak suka ke anak awak*
27 *berkawan dengan budak rupa tu. Awak tak perasan ke Rafie tu*
28 *macammana? Pelik je perangai. Ni, mak bapak dia pun sama. Macam*
29 *baru balik turun kapal terbang turun dari London. Hish:: tak berkenan*
30 *betul saya lah.*

31 Me? I am to be blamed for? Alisa? Do you even like if our daughter hangs
out

32 with a cross-dresser? He's a weirdo. I don't get their parents as well; they
33 look as if they've just landed from London and don't know anything about
us.

34

35 Dhia's mom: °Bang, London ke, Africa ke, diaorang tu orang melayu. Diaorang tu
36 bukan penyamun. °

37 I don't care if they are from London or Africa; they are still Malays.

38 It's not like they steal things from people.

39

40 Dhia's father: <Saya tak cakap pun penyamun, cuma saya tak suka je cara hidup
41 diaorang tu. Kita pun tak tahu, diaorang tu sembahyang ke tidak, tak
42 tahu lah.

43 That's not my point. I'm just not comfortable with their lifestyles.

44 We don't even know if they pray.

45

46 Dhia's mom: °Ba::ng, kita tak baik tegur hal sembahyang, bang.
47 Sembahyang tu, antara dia dengan tuhan. Kita tak boleh pertikaikan.
48 Kita punya sembahyang ni pun entah sempurna entah tak. Entah tak
49 terima apa pun. °

50 Whether they pray or not, that's between them and God.

51 We don't even know if our prayers are good enough to be granted
52 heaven.

53

54 Dhia's father: Apa, apa pun tolong cakap pada Dhia, jangan dia berkawan dengan si
55 Rafie tu lagi. Kalau saya dapat tahu dia berkawan jugak, saya hantar
56 dia kat sekolah agama. ((leaves the conversation))

57 Whatever it is, please tell Dhia to stop hanging out with Rafie. If I still
58 hear that she hangs out with Rafie, I'll send her to a religious school.

59

60 Dhia's mom: .hh

The narrative exchange above reflects equal turn-takings with no overlaps. However, the precise understanding of being a “girl” is problematic for Dhia’s father, even though Rafie has re-figured himself as a girl, fulfilling the visual meaning of “girl.” Dhia’s father feels that his prescription has been falsely interpreted by Rafie (lines 5-6), Dhia’s mother who attempts to establish herself as the dominant “knower” reasons and plays by logic; reminding Dhia’s father of the precise meaning of “girl” established by the father prior (lines 8-9), a logic to which Dhia’s father negates and substitutes with Malay-Muslim arguments instead (lines 11-17). Dhia’s mother retaliates by using logic and rationale by pointing out that Dhia and Rafie have been friends since kindergarten and that there is nothing malicious or ethically wrong by their being together (lines 19-24), blaming Dhia’s father’s behaviors of meddling in children’s “business.” This is the point at which the conflict is gradually developing. Not only has Dhia’s father changed his reasoning from semantics to defend his choice; he switches the focus of the argument to blaming Rafie’s parents for not teaching Rafie the appropriate way of Malay lifestyles (lines 26-33). Again, Dhia’s mother challenges Dhia’s father’s principles by stating the logic that humans are created equal, even pointing out the irks behind overgeneralization (lines 35-38). Dhia’s father repeatedly defends his choice by trying to argue along the line of religion (lines 40-44); to which Dhia’s mother disagrees by stating that submission to god is a private issue (lines 46-52). Not clarifying the nature of the argument, the father inadvertently closes the narrative exchanges by, again, playing the religious “card,” (lines 54-58) as if the decision on distancing Dhia from Rafie has been made. At this juncture (line 60), Dhia’s mother, having lost face, utters a sigh of disappointment.

Subsequently, Dhia’s and Rafie’s families get together to clarify the issue on whether Dhia is allowed to befriend Rafie. They gather in Rafie’s house to pursue the discussion. Table 2 serves as our point of analysis.

Table 2. Power, *adat*, and gender relations

1	Dhia’s mother:	<i>Maafkan saya, Cik Midah. Belah kami ni:: belah perempuan. Kena</i>
2		<i>hati-hati sikitlah.</i>
3		Sorry, Mam. We have a girl, so we ask to be respected.
4		
5	Rafie’s father:	<i><Apa syaratnya, Encik Amir?</i>
6		So, what’s the condition, Mr Amir?
7		
8	Dhia’s father:	<i>Syarat dia, senang je:: boleh pandang-pandang, tapi tak boleh</i>
9		<i>pegang-pegang. Duduk renggang-renggang. Jauh-jauh takpe, nanti</i>
10		<i>biar malu pulak mesra dia.</i>
11		The condition? Easy- you can have eye contact, but not physical contact.
12		They are also to sit far apart from one another so she can be [demure].

13

14 Rafie: <[Kenapa]

15 [Why]

16 *kena malu-malu, ayah? Dhia dah kenal Rafie ni dah lama dah.*

17 Why daddy? I feel like I have known Dhia forever.

18

19 Rafie's father: *°Nak tahu kenapa sebenarnya? Sebab malu-malu tu boleh jaga*

20 *tatususila kita. Orang kata, malu-malu tu boleh jadi perisai kita sebagai*

21 *orang-orang yang beriman. Faham tu?*

22 O' boy. You want to know why? Because by being modest and demure,
we

23 can show our politeness and some say we can use these to protect our
faith.

24 You get it?

25

26 Rafie:

27

When they get together, the focus of the discussion is on whether Dhia and Rafie should be separated and the extent to which their relationship is governed. It all begins with Dhia's mother requesting for some understanding on their separation considering Dhia is still young (lines 1-3). As we traverse prior, Rafie's father who first opposes but later sides with Rafie's father, immediately clarifies the purpose of the meeting (lines 5-6). Seeing pleased with Rafie's father reaction, Dhia's father suggests that they are to distance themselves with possibilities of eye contacts (lines 8-12). Upon hearing this, Rafie disagrees and argues for logic; that Dhia and he have known each other since they are small (lines 14-17). Rafie's father disagrees with this logic and chooses Malay-Muslims argument instead, simultaneously asking for clarification checks and closing the interaction (lines 19-24). At this position, Rafie resolves in affirmative, and says "I do," having made to agree to his father's decision (lines 26-27).

CONCLUSION

These scenes shed lights on the dynamics of power exchange system regarding underlying gender relations. In two of these scenes, we have seen two types of relationship- the first allows women to consent and the other to dissent. Even when Malay women attempt to establish themselves as the dominant "knower" through using logic, we have seen that their arguments are turned down whereas in scenes where women are hardly given any chance of a voice, they are made invisible through mere sighs as if they have been pushed to a position where they lack personal choices or a position where they are voiceless. Thus, what we have

seen here gives an indication that in any events where there are disagreements; logics are thrown out while *adat* is privileged instead. This is made clear in the narrative exchanges above where both Rafie and Rafie's mother are made to agree to Dhia's father decisions. In any event, ultimately, we show that gender struggles between them have legitimized the position of the dominant knowers, whose discourses rely on Malay *adat*.

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