

## WOMEN AND MODERNITY IN MALAY TELEVISION DRAMAS: A CASE STUDY OF “AZLINA”

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### INTRODUCTION

The year 1991 saw the unveiling of Prime Minister Mahathir’s plan to transform Malaysia into a fully developed country by the year 2020. This grand plan, or Vision 2020, soon became the catch phrase of the 90’s, one that the media were quick to promote and publicise via patriotic songs aired during prime-time viewing and via certain television programmes. Vision 2020 is also Mahathir’s modernity project as it provides the push towards greater economic prosperity, the adoption and celebration of Western technology and modern lifestyle. A move towards a modern lifestyle is not without problems. For there are bound to be contestations and conflicts, especially where women are concerned, as it requires substantive changes in the roles, status and functions of women. How have the media, in particular our local Malay dramas, responded to these contestations and conflicts in their portrayal and representation of women? How have the media, in particular our local Malay dramas, responded to the varied and complex discourses of modernity? In attempting to address these questions, this paper attempts a critical discourse analysis of one of the dramas entitled “Azlina”, a TV3 offering, by focusing on the women in this drama text from the perspective of language as in presuppositions and commonsense assumptions. Presuppositions are analysed mainly to show how the underlying processes of language play a vital role in reinforcing certain prevailing representations of modern femininity, those that are shaped and informed by patriarchal discourses.

Language is the focus of my study as the articulations about Malay women and Malay women’s articulations *vis-a-vis* the discourses of modernity in this drama text are essentially made via linguistic means. Language, as such, plays a pivotal role in the discourse construction of these women. I focus on presuppositions and commonsense assumptions as they are propositions which producers of texts take as already established or “given”. In this regard, my intention is to find out what these presumed or “given” knowledge are with reference to Malay women, what prevailing notions of femininity, masculinity and gender relations abound in this text and what kinds of discourses help to shape and inform it. I intend to interrogate these presumed or “given” knowledge

as I want to find out whether or not they are being contested in any way. This is crucial as presumed knowledge, if not contested, can help to maintain hegemonic relations or asymmetrical relations of power, in this case between the different sexes (Fairclough 1995: 15).<sup>1</sup> Having said that, I acknowledge the fact that meaning and agenda can also reside in the visuals used and in non-verbal communication such as the use of sound effects, camera shots, body language etc. However, these aspects of the text are not going to be investigated as they are beyond the scope of this small-scale study.

I have structured the paper in the following manner: First, I attempt to define a number of terms and concepts that consistently appear in the paper and then I briefly discuss the methodology that is used in the study; Second, I discuss the discourse of modernity, in particular Kessler's idea of the "reinvention of tradition"; Third, I discuss Mahathir's Vision 2020 and its attendant discourses and their implications on the Malay community, Malay women in particular. Fourth, is the textual analysis of the selected drama text and lastly, I provide a concluding summary.

## TEXT AND DISCOURSE

"Text" is used in this paper in the sense of a semantic unit, as a product of a discourse process (Halliday and Hasan 1985). The term "discourse" is applied to both the processes of production and interpretation. The linguistic features of a text are the traces which help to convey the discourse processes of production as well as the cues in the discourse processes of interpretation. Both these processes are related to interpretive resources in the human mind. These interpretive resources which are also known as Members' Resources are drawn upon by text interpreters and readers when they attempt to make sense of a text. Members' Resources include linguistic knowledge, representations of the world, ideas, beliefs and assumptions (Fairclough 1989: 24).

In relation to the methodology used in the analysis, I adopt the three dimensions that Fairclough uses (1989, 1992, 1995) for Critical Discourse Analysis:

- (a) Description: this stage is concerned with the investigation of the formal properties of the text.
- (b) Interpretation: this stage is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction, where the text is seen as the product of a process of production and as the resource of a process of interpretation.

- (c) Explanation: this stage is concerned with the relationship between interaction and the larger social context, and the meaning effects that result from such a relationship (1989: 26).

Since these dimensions are to be seen as analytic procedures, they are presented separately as above. However, in my analysis such a separation is not made as these dimensions are closely connected to one another. To describe a formal item in a text, one has also to make some kind of interpretive, explanatory analysis (Magalhaes 1995: 188).

### PRESUPPOSITIONS AND COMMONSENSE ASSUMPTIONS

As far as this paper is concerned, presuppositions are propositions that producers of texts consider as already established or “given” (Fairclough 1992: 120). Presuppositions are cued in texts via a number of formal features. For instance, when a male addresser in the selected drama text utters the following utterance to a female addressee “*Ini bukan kerja orang perempuan*” (English translation: “This is not women’s work”) without making any qualifications to it, the deictic form “*ini*” (this) which refers to the immediate context of situation, the one which shows the woman tending to her farm, mending chicken coops, broken fences etc. presupposes the proposition that one can possibly demarcate jobs according to lines of gender.

However, if one qualifies the utterance by saying “*Ini bukan kerja orang perempuan tetapi saya, walaupun seorang perempuan, berjaya melakukannya*” (English translation: This is not women’s work but, although I’m a woman, I’m capable of doing it successfully”), the addresser (text producer) is attempting to give his own interpretation by contesting the above two propositions. Presuppositions are an important part of intertextuality as they provide the means of incorporating other people’s text into our very own. Presuppositions do not belong to texts, instead they emanate from a text producer’s interpretation of intertextual context. The expression “This is not women’s work” and the presupposition it cues is derived from a prior text and the sentence and in the utterance “This is not women’s work, but, although I’m a woman, I’m capable of doing it successfully” the presupposition is being contradicted by a new text (Fairclough 1992: 121). Presuppositions can be considered to have ideological functions especially when the more powerful actors impose their interpretations of facts on those with less power.

Essentially, to presuppose something is to assume that there are other texts that are “common ground” for the text producer and reader, where what is

presupposed, the implicitly stated, has now become the explicitly said (Fairclough 1995: 107). The use of the expression “common ground” is related to the term “common sense” as used by the American sociologist Garfinkel (1967), one who writes of the “familiar commonsense world of everyday life” (Magalhaes 1995: 186). The commonsense world is founded on the assumptions and expectations of the various members of a society. These assumptions and expectations guide the actions of the various members of a society, apart from helping them (the members) to interpret the actions of fellow members. These assumptions and expectations or what Fairclough (1989) refers to as Members Resources play a vital role in the interpretation and explanation of discourse as they are, more often than not, implicit and taken for granted (1995: 186). As regards the example given above, it makes sense because it is commonly assumed that the male and female sex are biologically different hence, they have different abilities and capabilities. Implicit meaning is never asserted in a text but are activated by a reader when interpreting a text. Producers of texts invariably deploy textual cues to ensure that readers are positioned in the text in such a way that in order to make sense of a text they have to consider the assumptions that are made in the text (1995: 186-187).

## THE DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY

Modernity is a “multidimensional” concept, one that is vague and open to a whole host of polysemous and indeterminate meanings (Felski 1995: 9). The fuzziness of the concept can be traced to the disagreement amongst historians, sociologists, anthropologists, cultural critics, and social critics about the concept’s origin — the very beginnings of “modern age” and the manner in which “modernity” and often, its counterpart, “tradition” have been characterised (Jensen 1990: 60).<sup>2</sup>

As regards this paper, I attempt to take into consideration Kessler’s (1992) understanding of modernity for he studies this phenomenon in relation to contemporary Malay political culture. Kessler takes as his starting point the view of “the modernity of tradition” as put forward by the political scientists Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph (1967). In their view, tradition is not a “surviving residue” of the past but is a recent construct, a contemporary modern phenomenon. It is essentially “a product of modernity” (Kessler in Kahn & Loh 1992: 134). With rapid development and subsequent dislocation, there is a need to hold on to some “familiar, ancient and deeply rooted cultural elements” that can provide some kind of “personal authenticity” and “collective, often national, identity” (1992: 134). What we normally take for granted as being “there” (tradition/past practices) is suddenly made visible, “recaptured,

revisited, defended” — because there is a disruptive force, in the form of modernity, that could threaten its very existence (1992: 134). Kessler, then links this argument with Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) idea of “the invention of tradition”. Many traditions which may appear to be old and obsolete are “invented” or “manufactured” to serve particular purposes. In this sense, they become a “recent construct”.

Kessler illustrates how this is done in a Malaysian context, by offering a semiotic interpretation of a patriotic song entitled *Lagu Setia* (The Loyalty Song). This was a “regime-stabilizing anthem” that was aired over the radio and television airwaves, as part of a campaign to ensure Mahathir’s position as the premier (1992: 134). This took place in 1987 when his position was threatened by a rival, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah of Kelantan. Kessler shows how “loyalty” or the idea of “obligatory followership”, an archaic Malay political value, was “reimagined” and “reinvented” as something that is chic and modern when the song was sung, not by a stuffy national choir, but by young and likeable female vocalists (1992: 154). On television, the song was juxtaposed with visual images of a modern-day Malaysia. It was a successful campaign as the song could be heard on the lips of members of the public, including Singaporeans (1992: 155).

Taking into consideration the idea of the “invention of tradition” as put forth by Hobsbawm & Ranger and Kessler, it is my aim to discuss its significance in relation to Mahathir’s Vision 2020 and its various challenges when analysing the drama text. However, before attempting to do that, it is pertinent that I first discuss Mahathir’s modernity project and its implications on the Malay community, Malay women in particular.

## MODERNITY AND VISION 2020

Vision 2020 or its oft-quoted Malay equivalent *Wawasan 2020*, was first unveiled by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, during an inaugural meeting of the newly established Malaysian Business Council (MBC), in Kuala Lumpur on 28 February 1991. The Prime Minister used this opportunity to present a working paper on, “Malaysia: The Way Forward”, to a council of 62 members, one which brought together “the elite of the state and the captains of Malaysian commerce and industry” (Khoo 1995: 327). In this working paper, Mahathir outlined several challenges that faced the nation and her people, challenges that had to be confronted if the nation aspires to be “fully developed by the year 2020”. These are (Zaharom in Zaharom & Souchou 1994: 179-180):

- (i) “establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny...at peace with itself... (and) ...made up of one Bangsa Malaysia”.
- (ii) “creating a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian society with faith and confidence in itself...psychologically subservient to none and respected by the peoples of other nations”.
- (iii) “fostering and developing a mature democratic society, practising a form of mature consensual, community-oriented Malaysian democracy that can be a model for many developing countries”.
- (iv) “establishing a fully moral and ethical society...strong in religious and spiritual values and imbued with the highest of ethical standards”.
- (v) “establishing a mature, liberal and tolerant Malaysian society”.
- (vi) “establishing a scientific and progressive society...innovative and forward looking”.
- (vii) “establishing a fully caring society and a caring culture, a social system in which society will come before self”.
- (viii) “ensuring an economically just society...in which there is fair and equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation”.
- (ix) “establishing a prosperous society, with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient”.

These challenges, as many social scientists have pointed out, are not “novel” in any way for they represent a logical progression of previous policy declarations by the Mahathir administration, policies such as the New Economic Policy (NEP)<sup>3</sup> and its stress on the “fair and equal distribution of the wealth of the nation”, the Look East policy and its stress on “excellence” and “exemplary work ethic”, the Privatization policy and its dependence on the private sector, “an accelerated industrial drive”, and the productive partnership of Malaysia Incorporated (Khoo 1995: 328; Zaharom in Zaharom & Souchou 1994: 181). These policies were introduced in the main to make the Malaysian economy much more competitive in the global marketplace (Zaharom in Curran & Park 2000: 140). In helping to strike a balance between capital and spiritual growth, there was also a call to heed to Islamic principles to ensure “a fully moral and ethical society...strong in religious and spiritual values” (Khoo 1995: 328).

If one were to examine the discourses that operate in the Vision, one finds that there are actually quite a number of them. These include, amongst others, the discourses of democracy, liberalism, patriotism, religion, capitalism, individualism, development and so on. The integration of some of these discourses, in particular the discourses of democracy, liberalism, capitalism and religion is suspect as, needless to say, there are far too many discursive differences between them, differences which cannot be resolved that easily (Kress 1985: 17). For one, it is quite difficult to imagine that such a society can hope to be “democratic”, “liberal”, “just”, “moral” and “ethical” simply because a highly competitive society is individualistic and not communalistic, it is also one where self comes before society and not the other way round.

Essentially, one finds that the Vision is a strange mix of the “old” and the “new”, and, if you will, “counter-modern” and “modern values”. For instance, in attempting to establish a society that is “secure and developed”, “liberal”, “scientific”, “progressive”, “innovative”, “forward-looking”, “prosperous”, “competitive”, “robust”, “dynamic” and “resilient”, the Vision is actually helping to promote values that are in line with contemporary Western modes of thought, values which it sees as necessary in modernizing a nation and its people. These certainly have far-reaching implications on gender relations in the country, the Malay community, in particular.

A capitalist-driven and highly competitive economy expects full participation from its citizenry, women and men alike, in the realization of its goals. Such a profit-oriented economy, one can imagine, cannot afford to implement a rigid separation between female and male domains of work, as its aim is to tap to the fullest each and every citizen’s true potential. This brings good tidings for women as it entails greater opportunities for women to participate in the various sectors of the economy, be they education, business, finance or politics. It is not my intention in this paper to prove or refute this point but suffice to say there has been a significant increase in the number of Malay women participating in certain, albeit not all, sectors of the economy. However, Malay women’s entry into such a modern economy may have a backlash on masculinity, as regards Malay men, as the former’s entry can be envisaged as a challenge to male economic power and male authority over their women – their wives, daughters, sisters and so on (Ong in Ong & Peletz 1995: 165). As Aihwa Ong (1995: 165) succinctly points out in her study of a particular Malay rural society<sup>3</sup> in Selangor, both Malay *adat* (custom) and Islamic principles which help to define adult Malay womanhood dictate that:

A basic aspect of a man’s role was guardianship—of his sisters’, wife’s, and daughters’ virtue. By extension, all village men were responsible for the moral status of all village women. This code

of morality was often explained in terms of men's greater rationality and self control (*akal*) and women's greater susceptibility to animal lust (*nafsu*).

The above quotation reveals one salient point: that in Malay rural society, gender differentiation is communicated in terms of morality and not in the biological sense. A man's adult status is defined by his ability to exercise some form of self-control and control of his wife's sexuality. Malay men's collective identity in the village, in contrast, is defined by their ability to regulate the activities of unmarried women, both "virgins and *janda* (divorcees)". Such a control over female sexuality helps to further reaffirm male authority, the boundaries that delineate the spaces that men and women occupy in order to ensure the cultural survival of the Malay community experiencing "modernization" (1995: 164-165).

The Vision and its attendant policies create conditions that would make it difficult for Malay men to regulate or control the social and personal lives of Malay women, their sexuality in particular. This is because with better educational and job opportunities Malay women would achieve greater personal autonomy, be more financially independent apart from being in a position to make their own decisions and manage their own lives. Mahathir's modernity project can be perceived as a double-edged sword as, on the one hand, it promises greater liberty and agency to Malay women, but, on the other, it poses a threat to Malay men's authority and hegemony. In addition, Malay women undergoing "modernization" have also to adopt traits that may destabilise prevailing notions of femininity. To compete on an equal footing with men in the modern sectors of the economy, Malay women have to be "confident", "assertive" and "independent" and perhaps, more than that, to be individualistic and to put self before community. One can easily sense the paradoxical situation that Malay women find themselves in as they have to cater to both the conflicting demands of modernity and Malay *adat* or tradition.

How has the Vision, its challenges and paradoxes impacted on television? Given the above backdrop and given the fact that Malaysia's state-controlled television that is Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) and its rival commercial stations such as TV3 and NTV7 have to operate within certain constraints, constraints that take the form of certain official directives, prohibitive laws and regulations<sup>5</sup> that govern their daily operations, how have RTM and other television stations, in particular the local Malay dramas that they channel responded to Mahathir's Vision and its challenges? How have the media, in particular our local Malay dramas, responded to these contestations and conflicts in their portrayal and representation of women? How have the women and men in these dramas responded to the varied and complex discourses of modernity? Are discourses



of modernity problematised in any way? If they are, in what forms do they take? Whose voice or discourse is being articulated most of the time and whose is marginalised or suppressed? These are pertinent questions that need to be asked and which this paper attempts to address in the following section.

In attempting to address the above questions, I focus on the presuppositions and the commonsense assumptions that these drama texts are making about women. Since this study requires an in-depth textual analysis, only one drama text would be analysed. This particular drama text, entitled "Azlina", a TV3 offering, was written by Pak Latief and directed by Habsah Hassan. It was aired over the Panorama slot on the 19th of February 2001 from 4.00-5.30 p.m.

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In order to study the responses towards the Vision, this study attempts to analyze the language of the drama that has been selected, in particular the presuppositions and commonsense assumptions that have been detected in this particular text.

The story revolves around Azlina, a young, attractive 27 year-old divorcee. Armed with a degree in agricultural studies, Azlina decides to venture into rural farming on a large scale. Many people in the village, women and men alike, are sceptical of her abilities but more than that, attempts are made by a married man, Encik Deraman, the Chairman of the Village Development Committee, to court her. In addition, two other young bachelors try to woo her, one, a banker, Imran, who is highly conservative and the other, Nasrul, a modern young graduate from Australia. Pressured by her mother and society to get married, since a young divorcee is the subject of gossip in a small village, Azlina decides to choose between the two suitors. Azlina rejects Nasrul in favour of Imran as Nasrul is bent on transforming her into the kind of modern, sophisticated woman that she clearly refuses to be. Imran, on the other hand, wants to marry her to protect her and to provide her proper guidance.

In order to analyse the various presuppositions and commonsense assumptions that are made about women, men and gender relations in this text, it is worthwhile to consider the following verbal exchange between Azlina and Encik Deraman.

Encik. Deraman: *Ini bukan kerja orang perempuan, biar saya yang buat. Takkan saya nak tolong pun tak boleh!*

(This is not women's work, let me do it. Why can't I help you?)

Azlina: *Bukan tak boleh, bukankah saya ini seorang janda?*  
(Sure you can. But am I not a divorcee?)

Encik. Deraman: *Habis janda bukan manusiakah?*  
(Aren't divorcees human?)

Azlina: *Sebab saya manusia lah saya menjadi sumber kecurigaan orang-orang kampung ini!*  
(Because I'm human, the villagers are suspicious of me)

In the above interaction, one can detect two main presuppositions and several assumptions. The first presupposition concerns the physical or “masculine” tasks that Azlina is involved in and the second one concerns her status as a divorcee. For instance, the deictic form “ini” (this), which refers to the immediate interactive situation, one that shows her busily performing “masculine” tasks like hammering nails and mending broken fences presupposes the proposition that one can possibly delineate jobs according to lines of gender. The implicit assumptions being:

- that there are biological differences between women and men;
- that these biological differences predispose women and men to certain kinds of occupations only;
- that there is such a thing as a female sphere and a male sphere in terms of occupation and that the boundaries between the two cannot be blurred; and
- that, as regards rural farming, a woman is obviously subordinate to man, hence, she has to depend on a man if she wants to be successful in that particular sphere of activity.

The indefinite article “*seorang*” (“a”) in “*seorang janda*” (“a divorcee”) presupposes the proposition that divorcees are women who are different from other women. This makes sense if one considers the commonsense assumptions that prevail in society about divorcees, particularly Malay society. These are:

- that divorcees cannot be trusted because they are sexually experienced;
- that divorcees are dangerous women;
- that divorcees have the tendency to tempt or lure unsuspecting men from their wives; and

- that divorcees, being much older and sexually experienced, are inclined to prey on young, unmarried men.

It is obvious that the above two presuppositions and assumptions are largely shaped and informed by the discourses of sexism and patriarchy, two discourses which help define a woman's role, function and place in society with reference to men. As far as Encik Deraman is concerned, rural farming is work that he considers as unfeminine. In this text, Encik Deraman makes attempts to ensure that Azlina does not try to transgress existing patriarchal orders. This explains the reason why he wants to help her. As the drama unfolds, he urges Azlina to remarry, offering himself as a prospective suitor, so that he, a man, could help her manage the farm. By marrying Azlina, he would elevate her status in society, apart from ensuring that she is legally subordinated to a man, as a young divorcee, a sexually experienced woman, is both vulnerable and dangerous (Ong in Ong & Peletz 1995 165). Azlina, a modern highly educated young Malay woman, is constructed as a liberated female; she is confident, self-assured, assertive and is unafraid to venture into male territory. However, she is also seen as someone who upholds basic *adat* and religious practices. This is observed when she rebukes Encik Deraman for flirting with her and for not respecting the strict social boundary that separates a married man from a divorcee. The following is the verbal exchange between Azlina and Encik Deraman:

Deraman: *...Kan baik kalau kerja-kerja ini diusahakan bersama dengan suami yang betul-betul mengerti dan menyayangi Azlina*  
(Wouldn't it be better for you to share the burden of work with a husband who truly understands and loves you).

Azlina: *Jangan timbulkan kecurigaan kat sini Encik Deraman. Saya kenal Kak Leah.*  
(Do not create doubts here, Encik Deraman. I know Kak Leah).

Deraman: *Apa yang Azlina tahu tentang Leah itu?*  
(What do you know about Leah?)

Azlina: *Kak Leah seorang isteri yang setia, cantik pula itu, bertanggungjawab terhadap suami dan anak.*  
(Kak Leah is a loyal wife, she is beautiful too and is also a responsible wife and mother).

- Deraman: *Mungkin bertanggungjawab. Cemburu tu yang saya tak tahan.*  
(She may be responsible but I can't tolerate her jealous nature).
- Azlina: *Saya pun cemburu kalau dapat suami macam Encik Deraman*  
(I would also be jealous if I had married a man like you).

In the process of rebuking him she tells him that he should not be looking for another wife as Leah possesses all the right attributes; she is loyal, beautiful and is also a responsible wife and mother. The indefinite article “*seorang*” (“a”) in “*seorang isteri yang setia*” (“a loyal life”) presupposes the proposition that Leah possesses the characteristics of a “good” wife and mother. The assumption is that a “good” wife and mother can ensure the success of a marriage. Leah is characterized as the typical gentle, nurturing, faithful and passive wife whose main concern in life is to fulfill the needs and wants of the family. The image that is created is a powerful stereotype of the ideal wife and mother, a traditional notion of a ‘good wife’ which Azlina herself is imbued by. These qualities, which are endorsed by both Malay *adat* and religious traditions, are indeed patriarchal in nature. It implies that a marriage is almost guaranteed success with a wife of such characteristics. This text is, however, silent on the role or responsibility of the husband. Within this exchange another assumption is also naturalized – that a jealous and possessive wife can cause a marriage to crumble. This text, if carried to its logical conclusion, suggests that the survival of a marriage is primarily hinged on women while men are not implicated at all.

Many other assumptions about women are reified as the drama progresses and mainly through the character of Azlina. This is observed in the following utterances:

- Azlina: *Mereka tu pandang serong pada Lina sebab Lina janda kan tapi adakah semua janda merampas suami orang, merampas anak muda orang. Mereka tu semua tak pernah baca suratkhbar berapa ramai gadis cantik yang merampas suami orang, ada pula tu isteri yang melakukan serong dengan suami orang lain. Mereka tak bacakah semua tu?*

(They are always suspicious of me because I'm a divorcee but do all divorcees snatch other women's

husbands, and other women's young sons? Haven't they read the newspapers about how young pretty girls ensnare other women's husbands and how some wives commit adultery behind their husbands' back? Haven't they read all that?)

In attempting to correct people's misconception about divorcees, Azlina, inadvertently, reproduces the stereotype of women as home-wreckers; the pretty young woman as the dangerous seducer or *femme fatale* and wives who indulge in secret trysts with other women's husbands. By highlighting such examples, it also serves to perpetuate the notion that it is a woman's responsibility – not man's – to maintain a good marriage. An opportunity could have been given to Azlina to challenge the many wrong assumptions that people make about women but this is not attempted at all. Azlina finds herself in a paradoxical situation. She is given agency to define her own subjectivity by challenging the many assumptions about divorcees and yet in the very process of doing this, she wittingly or otherwise aligns herself with the dominant patriarchal and sexist discourses.

Azlina's alignment with patriarchal forces is further reinforced in the following verbal exchange:

- Azlina: *Apa cita-cita Imran kalau beristeri nanti?*  
(What are your aspirations once you get married?)
- Imran: *Belum tahu*  
(Not sure)
- Azlina: *Belum tahu? Selalunya anak muda sekarang sebelum beristeri sudah ada rancangan kan — samada isterinya nak bekerjakah atau nak menjadi suri rumah tangga, nak sewa rumah, nak bermotosikal atau kereta kah, nak tinggal di kampung kah atau nak tinggal di bandar? Tapi Imran lain ia?*  
(Not sure? nowadays a young man before getting married would think about his future plans — whether his wife ought to pursue a career or whether she should just be a housewife, to rent a house, to buy a motorbike or a car, to stay in the village or in the city? But you're so different?)
- Imran: *Macam mana saya nak merancang kehidupan rumah tangga saya sebelum tahu siapa bakal menjadi isteri*

*saya, belum membayang perangai isteri saya, belum tahu kehendak isteri saya?*

(How am I going to plan my life when I don't know for sure who my wife is going to be, when I'm still not able to figure out her personality and her wants and needs?)

Azlina: *Tapi suami tu kan ketua rumah tangga dan pemimpin?*  
(But isn't the husband the head of the household, the leader of the family?)

Imran: *Pemimpin boleh buat apa kalau belum tahu bakal orang yang dipimpinnya.*  
(What can a leader do if he is not certain who he is going to lead?)

In the above exchange, the superior position of the husband *vis-à-vis* the wife in a domestic setting is further legitimated. Azlina does not defy nor resist the dominant patriarchal ideology neither does she try to re-negotiate the manner in which gender relations are perceived. In other words, Azlina, who had a university education and was exposed to liberal ideas, curiously does not attempt to promote the idea of complementarity and egalitarianism between husband and wife. In effect, she subscribes to the subordination of wife to husband in a marriage.

The above verbal exchanges and articulations are similar to the first encounter that took place between Azlina and Encik Deraman. Clearly no attempts are made by Azlina to counter the many assumptions that are being circulated about women. Surprisingly, a highly-educated and progressively minded Azlina becomes muted when faced with such situations, unable to use both reason and rationality in expressing her thoughts. As a consequence, the text does not make any efforts to dialogize the discourses of sexism and liberation or female empowerment. In fact, what is foregrounded is the conservative discourse of femininity and female passivity as Azlina is shown as someone in search of guidance and help from the men in the text. A rather "assertive" and "independent" Azlina becomes "helpless" overnight when she is seen procuring some form of financial help from the government, not through her own initiatives, but through the good offices of the Chairman, Encik Deraman, himself. What is also emphasized are women's physical shortcomings. In one particular scene, Imran, her potential suitor, was seen saving her from a nasty fall off a ladder. After saving her from utter abasement he makes the following remarks. The verbal exchange between Azlina and Imran is presented below:

Imran: *Kalau saya tak sampai ada nangka busuk jatultah jawabnya*  
(If I hadn't been here, a rotten jackfruit would have fallen down)

Azlina: *Hai tengok reban ayam itu Lina yang bucu tahu*  
(Look ...I was the one who built the chicken coop)

Imran: *Tupai tu hari-hari dia melompat, sampai masa nanti jatuh juganya*  
(A jumping squirrel would eventually fall to the ground).

Imran obviously has no faith in Azlina's entrepreneurial capabilities nor in any other woman's for that matter. Spewing forth sarcasm and cynicism, he undermines her confidence by implying that Azlina, being a woman, should not aspire to greater heights as she is bound to fall flat on her face. Imran, Azlina's would-be husband, a modern, highly educated young man, echoes Encik Deraman's sentiments and does not make any efforts to debunk the presupposition and assumptions that prevail about women. In fact, he reinforces a woman's subordinate place in a male-dominated world as instead of encouraging her, he shows scepticism and is only keen to make a decent woman of her by offering her marriage. For only through marriage can he protect and guide her.

This was certainly an insult to Azlina and to all womenkind but no attempts are made to challenge or contest this proposition. The text does not offer any critique of Imran's misogyny and prejudice as Azlina does not resist her subjugation by standing up for her rights (Caldas-Coulthard in Caldas-Coulthard & Coulthard, 1996: 253). In choosing to remain mute, the text appears not to be too sympathetic in its portrayal and representation of Azlina and her need to be independent and successful in a field which only males dare to enter. She may have the drive and determination to succeed but, on several occasions, she is reminded of her shortcomings as a woman and as a divorcee in that small Malay village. The text subtly dismisses the claims made by the earlier feminist discourse by allowing the dominant sexist and patriarchal discourses to reassert themselves. The dominant view is that women in this society need male protection and guidance by virtue of their sex.

Hence, Encik Deraman, who is already married, offers protection and guidance to Azlina by "adopting" her as a sister. Imran, on the other hand, does this by marrying her. The women in this text collude with the overarching patriarchal voice and discourse by confirming the centrality and desirability of men in all women's lives (1996: 252). In this regard, the text makes the assumption that all women are the same, that they are a homogeneous group of people, with similar wants and desires. Ironically, women in this text enable their own subjection without any coercion for the men did not blatantly conspire to subjugate women. As Maznah Mohamad<sup>6</sup> (1995) aptly puts it in her study of

Third World feminism, in such situations, “women become their own subject-agents, sustaining male privilege while circumscribing their own autonomy” (Maznah Mohamad in Maznah Mohamad & Wong 1994: 129). Azlina was not forced to marry neither was her mother coerced into believing in men’s superiority. The discourse of patriarchy, in particular the idea of the male as protector is evoked by the text producer for further confirmation and not refutation. For instance, this is what both Azlina and her mother say:

Azlina: *Tapi orang kata kat Lina suami tu tempat kita berlindung, tempat kita mendapat bimbingan...*  
(But people tell me that a husband is someone who can offer us protection, guidance)

Azlina’s mother: *Baguslah Encik Deraman...bimbinglah si Lina ini, nasihatkanlah dia. Kalaupun diganggunya orang itu berilah perlindungan kat dia.*  
(That’s good, Encik Deraman...give Lina some guidance, advice her. Protect her if there are those who wish to harm her in any way).

Azlina’s mother: *Setiap wanita inginkan suami yang kacak, sihat, berharta, bertanggungjawab dan melindungi kita dan menyintai kita*  
(Every woman wants a husband who is handsome, wealthy, responsible and one who can protect them and love them)

In the above exchange, imperatives such as “*bimbinglah*” (provide guidance), “*nasihatkanlah dia*” (advise her), “*berilah perlindungan*” (provide her protection) help to construct Azlina’s mother as an adviser who is in a position to command Azlina because she is much more experienced and knowledgeable. This image of Azlina’s mother resonates with the Islamic ideal of the woman as an educator and guide to her children (Ong in Ong & Peletz 1995: 131). Two main presuppositions are made here; firstly, that Azlina, like many other women, need male protection and guidance by virtue of their sex. Secondly, that every woman wants and needs a husband to be protected and loved. The implicit assumption is that women are not able to be on their own, independent and self-reliant as they have to depend on a man to take care of them. This does not augur well for a nation which is bent on producing a people who is “progressive” and “forward looking” and for tapping the potentials of every one, man or woman, in line with the ideals of Vision 2020. Azlina makes an informed choice, she chooses to remarry as without a husband she is perceived



as a threat to male authority. By marrying she maintains male authority and hegemony and further validates her subordinate position. The text appears to have, to use Kessler's words, "reinvented", "recaptured", and "reimagined" the idea of guardianship or male protectionism, a traditional Malay value, to appear as something that is chic and modern, as it is willingly embraced by Azlina, a dutiful daughter, and a modern, highly educated, young Malay divorcee. Strangely, Azlina is not perturbed about Imran's conservatism and the discouraging stance he adopts towards her vocation. Imran is not going to allow Azlina the freedom nor space to grow intellectually and professionally. The text is oppressively silent about this even though Azlina was once married to a highly insecure man, one who physically and mentally traumatized her.

The above analysis reveals that the text producer is strident about maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity. The Malay women in this text show ambivalence in the Vision's promotion of the modern working women or the ideal, secular, career woman. A "modern" Malay woman, as envisaged by the Vision is perceived as a threat to male authority at home and in the public sphere. Azlina was not given the space to compete with men on an equal footing as she was a woman, a daughter and perhaps a potential wife and mother. It was not possible for Azlina to choose to realise her true potential in the public sphere even though she has the knowledge and expertise. As Aihwa Ong argues both Malay adat and Islam, and all other customary practices and Great Religions, are "heavily patriarchal" as they place substantial weight on women's roles as wives and mothers (Ong in Ong & Peletz 1995: 187). Patrilineal presence and importance in this society has to be acknowledged as modernity, with its discourses of development, liberation, emancipation and gender equality can threaten not only male hegemony but, more than that, the cultural identity of this society. Hence, this explains the need for this society to hold on to some "familiar, ancient and deeply rooted cultural element", the idea of the male as protector, as modernity can disrupt the collective identity of the Malays as a race and as a community of people. And it is up to the Malay women to uphold this tradition. Perhaps this can also explain why the Vision attempts to integrate both tradition and modernity, by stressing on spiritualism and the adherence to religious and communal values.

## **CONCLUDING SUMMARY**

In conclusion, I find that the drama text that I have analysed above using the analytic procedures developed by Fairclough show that little or no attempts are made by the text to contest the various presuppositions and assumptions that are made about women. Although the Vision and the various State policies

“liberate” women, in this regard Malay women for campuses and the marketplace, nevertheless a strict gender divide is still maintained between domains of work as, essentially, there is fear of female domination in the workplace, one that could easily threaten Malay men’s authority and hegemony (Ong in Ong & Peletz 179). One way in which control over the Malay woman can be exercised, her sexuality in particular, as seen here in the case of Azlina, an educated young divorcee of 27, is through marriage. Through marriage, Azlina inscribes herself into a “traditional” subordination, one that enables her to further maintain male hegemony. And, in return, she is assured of continuous male support, guidance and protection. The Vision may liberate but it is not able to provide ways for Malay women and men alike to cope with new self-doubts and anxieties (1995: 179). By not equipping the various characters, in particular Azlina, with tools of rational discourse and enquiry, the drama legitimizes existing practices but, more than that, the drama does not give space for opposing voices and discourses to negotiate with the dominant discourses of patriarchy.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Asymmetrical relations of power would mean one person, entity or group having the ascribed authority to control the other's actions, liberties and not *vice-versa*. Refer also to Roger Fowler (1991) for further information.

<sup>2</sup> Modernity could have possibly started in the 1920's, the turn of the century, the late, middle or end of the nineteenth century. Alternatively, many have considered technological innovations such as the printing press, cotton gin, telegraph, steam engine, satellites, computers and so on as heralding the dawning of a modern era (Jensen 1990: 60). Modernity has also been popularly defined as urbanization, industrialization, improved level of health care, bureaucratic organization, literacy, secularization, alienation, technological progress and so on (1990: 60). A "modern" society, as such, is one that has undergone several social, economic, political and cultural changes. Since these changes are seen as advancement, many argue that a "modern" society is founded on the notion of progress. Such a concept of "modernity" enables the construction of a period of time prior to this host of changes (1990: 59). This "before-time" is also known as the "pre-modern" or "traditional" time.

Many discourses of modernity have also been weaved out of the "assumed" contrasts that are posited between these two societies, contrasts that result in these two societies to be seen in binary terms. Brown (1976), for instance, sets up contrasting "ideal types" between the two (1990: 60). If traditional society is stable and unchanging, then modern society is unstable and ever changing or fluid. Traditional societies are perceived as paternalistic and hierarchical, they place importance on close familial and communal ties and hold on strongly to religious values. Modern societies, on the other hand, are much more bureaucratic and egalitarian, they emphasize individualism and secularism. Modernity is visualized as a corrupting influence on traditional life for it weakens a static, homogeneous society and fragments the cohesiveness of traditional communities (1990: 60). Modernity pollutes and contaminates as it disrupts the stability and coherence of traditional life. To many, modernity represents "a betrayal of promise" (1990: 59). This is because, the "development" story that modernity attempts to sell, the one that promises a better life for mankind can no longer be believed. Many discover that with "development" mankind may have become "materially rich", but there is a downside to it, as, in the process, mankind has also become "spiritually impoverished" (1990: 59).

From the above account, it is apparent that modernity has been cast as a "villain" and as a "potential hero" at the same time. It is a villain when it is seen as a phenomenon that contaminates a "potential hero" when it is seen as a phenomenon that can bring beneficial social change. Such a dual evaluation of modernity is far too simplistic and fallacious. To say that modernity "contaminates", one makes the assumptions that society that exists before the modern age, a traditional society, if you will, is homogeneous, pure and chaste and that it is problem-free. Surely, no society is homogeneous, neither is it without problems. Although one may find a good support

system in a traditional society, but at the same time, it could be a society which is repressive in many other ways. By the same token, modernity may bring beneficial social change, but this may not be enjoyed by each and every member of society, only those in powerful positions. These perspectives can be contested because they are ambivalent and contradictory.

<sup>3</sup> Aihwa Ong conducted fieldwork in Sungei Jawa ( a pseudonym), a village in Kuala Langat, in the state of Selangor. In her study of this small Malay village, she examines the contradictory social effects and consequences of Malaysia's State policies and Islamic revivalism on this society, with particular regard to Malay womanhood, family and kinship ties. For further information, read Aihwa Ong (1995), "State Versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies, and the Body Politic in Malaysia" in Aihwa Ong & Michael G. Peletz (eds) (1995).

<sup>4</sup> For an official explanation of the NEP, refer to Malaysia. (1988). *Dasar-Dasar Utama Kerajaan Malaysia* (The Basis of National Culture), Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on these constraints, regulations and prohibitive laws, see Zaharom (1995), "Commercialization and Control in a "Caring Society": Malaysian Media Towards 2020", in Zaharom and Souchow (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Refer to Maznah Mohamad (1994) for further information on Third World's women's movement *vis-à-vis* postmodernism and poststructuralism. In this regard, her concern is with the impact of western feminist paradigms on Third World women's movement.