

# Yasmin Ahmad: Auteuring a New Malaysian Cinematic Landscape

**Lee Yuen Beng**

*School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, MALAYSIA*  
adrianlee@usm.my

## **ABSTRACT**

*Since P. Ramlee, no other filmmaker but Yasmin Ahmad has been capable of creating a significant impact in Malaysian cinema. She achieved this through her films that have persistently challenged not only the conventions of Malaysian cinema, but also daringly exposed societal taboos and its hypocrisies on the cinematic screen. All her six films differ from the conservative, unadventurous and conventional Malaysian films that revolve around the tiresome, "tried and tested", monotonous entertainment containing elements of love (suka), sadness (duka) and humour (jenaka). Her films, which are criticisms about the failings of the Malaysian society and in particular the Malays, employ cosmopolitan themes of humour, love and humanism to move beyond merely focusing on race and ethnicity. In doing so, her films paradoxically employ the "sensitive" issue of interethnic relations to highlight the struggles faced by common Malaysians within and between cultures and religions. By highlighting the everyday problems faced by everyday people, Yasmin Ahmad has extensively altered the Malaysian cinematic landscape by removing demarcations along racial, ethnic, religion, cultural, age and gender lines. This allows her films to move beyond being focused on multiculturalism and to contest more socially, culturally and politically issues closely related to Malaysians. This consistent demonstration of cinematic aptitude and ideological*

*contestations are befitting of the qualities and characteristics of an auteur. This paper examines how Yasmin Ahmad's stylistic signature of blurring the boundaries of ethno-racial communities to move beyond multiculturalism, coupled with her cinematic capabilities and artistic styles of employing an experimental mix of stylistic elements from independent cinema, commercial cinema and television aesthetics in all her films would position her as an auteur.*

**Keywords:** *Malaysian cinema, auteur, cosmopolitan, postethnicity*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2003, Yasmin Ahmad introduced to Malaysian television an elderly couple bathing together wearing nothing but *sarongs* through her made for television feature, *Rabun*. A year later, Yasmin contentiously introduced a commercial oriented film blended with independent features through her first feature film *Sepet* (2004). *Sepet* became the first Malaysian film to cause a wide impact and protests on the Internet, across local and overseas media, and even in Parliament due to its depiction of a Malay family deemed as "too liberal" and the inter-ethnic love story between a Chinese boy and a Malay girl. The film had similarly depicted an intimate scene of characters from the Malay family seated on a staircase dressed in *sarongs* while combing each other's hair. Her next film *Gubra* (2005), the sequel to *Sepet*, had in the same way, tested the boundaries of ethnic and religious tolerance through the portrayal of interethnic romance and a Muslim Bilal who befriends a prostitute and pats a crippled dog. The cinematic discussions and examination of the undercurrents of race and ethnicity and religion in Malaysian high schools by Yasmin continued through *Muallaf* (2008) and *Talentine* (2009). While the latter can be considered the least controversial of Yasmin's films exploring inter-ethnic relationships, the former is heavily enveloped in religious and cultural nuances. As such, her films have been comprehended as an open examination of the rising ethnic and cultural divides of a Malaysian society that boasts of its multiethnic elements.

This has inevitably caused her films to be at the centre of many controversies and as a result attracted the attention of many Malaysians and made her a common enemy of the Lembaga Penapisan Filem (LPF) or Malaysian Film Censorship Board.

Her stylistic signature of openly discussing race and ethnicity, coupled with her cinematic capabilities and artistic styles featuring in all her films would position her as an auteur. In this examination of Yasmin Ahmad as auteur, positioning her as one however needs to go beyond purely locating her as the most important factor in the production of her films. This is because her films in its discussions of race, ethnicity and religion, should also be understood as efforts of moving beyond elements of multiculturalism by discussing "tabooed" and "untouchable" issues about sexuality, gender relations and politics.

## **AUTEURS, MADE-IN-MALAYSIA**

Scholarship about Malaysian auteurs remains insufficient. A general presumption of this insufficiency is the lack of Malaysian filmmakers befitting auteur qualities and characteristics. It would however be essential to academically examine the reasons behind this while properly defining the term auteur as its credibility has been subjected to constant debate over the years. Since the 1950s, debates have occurred over whether the term auteur exists as a concrete theory or merely as an approach of examining films. During this time, cinema introduced the director as an "authorial quality" by positioning the auteur as more important than the film by shifting importance from the star, producer and scriptwriter to the director (Casetti 1999: 79). The term auteur had in fact existed as a critical approach even before François Truffaut argued about the tradition of quality in French cinema and the cinema of auteurs (Caughie 2001: 15). The term auteur conceptualised within the framework of the Nouvelle Vague was initially suggested by Alexandre Astruc, who likened the camera to a pen based on the formula of *caméra-stylo* (Casetti 1999: 79). It was the *Cahiers* French film critics and "new avant-garde" filmmakers who first coined the term auteur or *la politique des auteurs* although the term

auteur has never been recognised as a theory in cinema as the *Cahiers* critics never made such a claim (Buscombe 1973: 75). The *Cahiers* critics rejected the tradition of quality of cinema and focused instead on how an auteur revealed its attitude and orientation by "interpreting" and "bending" cinema according to their expressive requirement through the creative use of *mise-en-scène* (Casetti, 1999: 80). Although the *Cahiers* group elevated filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock, Samuel Fuller, Jean Vigo, Wim Wenders and John Ford as auteurs while attacking French cinema, this romantic and conservative aesthetic notion of privileging only the auteur fails to take into account the contexts, ideologies and economic pressures associated with the industry (Hayward 1993: 13–14).

Debates about the validity of the auteur theory continued through the essay "Notes of the Auteur Theory in 1962", in which Andrew Sarris stated "Henceforth I will abbreviate 'la politique des auteurs' as the auteur to avoid confusion" (Buscombe 1973: 75). In opposition to the position of the *Cahiers* critics, Sarris in defence of the notion of authorship stated that a masterpiece must be examined within the historical context of cinema and not in isolation; that the limits imposed and possibilities offered by the economic and industrial system be examined; and that the elevation of a filmmaker as an auteur be opened to all (Casetti 1999: 80). Sarris was however, criticised for dividing cinema into a canon of "good" or "great" directors and the rest, and for using the term auteur to nationalistic and chauvinistic ends by elevating mainly American/Hollywood cinema to the status of the "only good cinema" (Hayward 1993: 15).

While French film critics signify the auteur as the scriptwriter or the artist who made the film, the *Cahiers* critics however gave preference to the filmmaker whose personality would be "written" in the film (Caughie 2001: 9). This is because the auteur proficiently maintains and sustains superior authority in terms of creative and production control. It becomes a mark of respect for a filmmaker with works superiorly distinct in terms of cinematic qualities, style and characteristics. According to Truffaut, a true auteur is an individual capable of creating and bringing a genuine and personal touch to a film based on an expression of personality

rather than simply reproducing the work of another individual (Buscombe 1973: 76). In short, a filmmaker whose films are truly cinematic and expressive with high levels of technical and artistic achievements (Thomson-Jones 2008); carry the recognisable and discernable style, recurrent stylistic signatures (art form, visual and aesthetics style) and thematic motifs of a filmmaker (Goss 2009) can be defined as an auteur. The film is therefore recognised as a direct expression of the personality of the filmmaker while the signature of the filmmaker becomes a guarantee of the value and quality of the work (Casetti 1999: 79). Specifically, three characteristics define an auteur. A filmmaker must: firstly, possess a level of technical competence and elementary flair in creating good films; secondly, have a group of films which exhibits a filmmaker's personality, signature, thoughts, stylistic characteristics, and feelings; and thirdly, capably put forth the filmmaker's "interior meaning" caused by the unavoidable and ambiguous tension persists between a filmmaker's personality and a film's material (Sarris 2005). These definitions and characteristics position the filmmaker as the most important factor in the production of a film. It is however also important to move past this idealised notion of placing only the filmmaker as the most important element in the production of a film. Equally important in the production of a film are its production crew and the ideology, themes, subject matter and codes interwoven in the narratives of a film. As such, in positioning a filmmaker as auteur, it is essential to examine both the technical competencies and ideology of a filmmaker.

Despite hundreds of Malaysian filmmakers winning numerous accolades both in Malaysia and overseas, there remains a shortage of Malaysian auteurs. What are the factors preventing the emergence of more Malaysian auteurs? Firstly, Malaysian cinema, which has been in existence for more than 80 years, is in essence a commercial enterprise. Malaysian cinema has since its inception been financially exploited as a commercial trade. Emphasis is placed on producing films capable of generating profits to recuperate heavy investments. This economic pressure requires filmmakers to reproduce another individual's work faithfully and self-effacingly; and is traced back to the practice of Indian expatriate filmmakers

merely reproducing successful Indian films into Malay films. Over the years, this practice has produced filmmakers incapable of proficiently conveying their personal expressions and styles. As a result, Malaysian cinema has successfully produced a number of "*metteurs-en-scenes*", and not auteurs. For example, filmmakers Aziz M. Osman and Shuhaimi Baba are at the mercy of their scripts as they merely adapt any given materials without alteration and any true personal style (Buscombe 1973). A second possible factor hindering the existence of more Malaysian auteurs is bureaucracy. State regulatory bodies such as LPF and The National Film Development Corporation (Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia, FINAS) become ultimate determinants of suitable content in scripts and films. Films considered as challenging the status quo, dissident or discussing issues considered "sensitive" are denied local production or exhibition. As a result, many filmmakers practise self-censorship and produce non-critical formulaic films. These restrictions not only deny filmmakers opportunities to express creativity and criticism, audiences are also denied the opportunity to engage with critical films. This restriction of creativity and ideology could have possibly prevented the emergence of more Malaysian auteurs.

Two Malaysian filmmakers belonging to two different eras can be distinctively positioned as auteurs: P. Ramlee and U-Wei Haji Saari. In the 1950s–1970s, P. Ramlee has consistently produced films criticising class struggles, poverty, illiteracy and materialism. His trilogy of *Bujang Lapok* comedies and melodramatic films such as *Anakku Sazali* (1956), *Antara Dua Darjat* (1960), and *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962) dealt with issues of class struggles within the Malay community. This enabled him to empathise with the audiences and likewise, his audiences with him. His usage of comedy and melodramatic influences to critique religion, racial tolerance and social class served as reminders to the Malays to amend their weaknesses and shortcomings. In the 1990s, U-Wei similarly produced films that examined issues of class struggles within the Malay community. His films such as *Perempuan, Isteri dan ...?* (1993), *Kaki Bakar* (1995) and *Jogho* (1999) examined issues of misplacement, relationships, alienation and identity of the Malays. Both P. Ramlee and U-Wei Haji Saari have consistently

addressed the same subject matter and sustaining authority over the cinematic qualities, stylistic signature and ideology in their films. As these two auteurs are located within two distinct eras of early Malaysian cinematic history, it has become timely for the search of an auteur in post-2000 Malaysian cinema.

#### **THE NEW MILLENNIUM MALAYSIAN AUTEUR**

Contemporary research on Malaysian cinema generally focuses on a new generation of Malaysian filmmakers. Dubbed the "Malaysian Digital Indies" (MDI), these filmmakers have heavily utilised digital technology, transnational capital and international film festivals. This preference of crossing borders in search for capital, foreign co-productions and an audience sympathetic towards their works has allowed them to be known within Asia and globally. These cine-literate and mostly self-trained filmmakers employ cosmopolitan themes to deconstruct issues of culture, religion, identity and representation. As such, they present new generic orders, aesthetics, narrative styles and production methods without adhering to state cinematic regulations. This open contestation of national issues and the extant political economy of Malaysian cinema is something previously unachievable by their predecessors. Despite this rise in the number of award-winning and critically acclaimed filmmakers such as Amir Muhammad, Ho Yuhang, Tan Chui Mui, Liew Seng Tat, Woo Ming Jin, Azharr Rudin and James Lee, the name Yasmin Ahmad remains most prominent. This is because her films about love, hope, forgiveness and humanism have extensively altered the Malaysian cinematic landscape by removing demarcations along racial, ethnic, religion, cultural values, age and gender lines. The propagating of such personal values allows her films to move beyond being focused on multiculturalism whilst serving as an inspiration to aspiring filmmakers.

In the post-2000 era, Yasmin Ahmad has created a significantly noteworthy impact in Malaysian cinema and society. In the press, Yasmin Ahmad is described by the *New Straits Times* as "an independent filmmaker to be reckoned with in the country" (Sittamparam 2004); *The National* labels her as a "director at the forefront of the independent film industry in Malaysia" (*The National* 2009); and *Variety* describes her as a "fast rising helmer" who is a "master at breezy, warm-hearted and sexually open repartee" (Weissberg 2007). Her six films draw cinematic inspiration from the works of Charlie Chaplin, Satyajit Ray, Pedro Almodovar, Takeshi Kitano and Yasujiro Ozu. Yasmin's works are similar to Indonesia's Nia Dinata, who is similarly overseas trained with an advertising background. Often at odds with the Indonesian film censorship board as her works contest social and Islamic values in Indonesia, her films are deemed controversial, as her works contest issues of homosexuality, migrant workers and polygamy. Her works however do not contest ethnicity but are similar to Yasmin's films.

Yasmin's films, like her television commercials, possess a very distinct style that deals with recurrent subject matter and themes. Upon venturing into filmmaking, Yasmin Ahmad was already renowned for her television commercials. Her television commercials that were screened in Malaysia and Singapore did not focus on race and ethnicity, religion, age or gender and could be read as her first efforts of moving beyond elements of multiculturalism. These television commercials aired during festive seasons and particularly for Malaysian Independence Day (*Merdeka*) instead focused on humanistic values of love, hope, and forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> This award winning creative director and self-taught filmmaker then successfully reproduced these values in Malaysian cinema by producing films that similarly moved beyond multiculturalism. In positioning her as auteur, it would be necessary to examine her cinematic qualities and characteristics, recurrent stylistic signatures, and cinematic narratives.

## A SENSE OF INDEPENDENCE

Yasmin Ahmad is largely recognised for her sense of independence. This is apparent in her films employing an experimental mix of humanistic themes with stylistic elements from independent cinema, commercial cinema, and television aesthetics. While her films are aimed at a mass audience that resist the conventional cinematic methods of Malaysian mainstream cinema, her films should not be strictly positioned as either arthouse or commercial. Her films should be recognised as unconventional films that effectively bridge the gap between commercial and independent filmmaking.

Yasmin Ahmad's sense of independence has allowed her to challenge essentialised views on auteurship and filmmaking. She achieves this by subverting and manipulating the expectations of not only the Malaysian cinema industry, but as a female Muslim filmmaker working in a male-dominated industry. In resisting as much as possible economic and political restrictions, she employs transnational methods that allow her to carry her own personal style, signature, characteristics and feelings. The usage of transnational methods also allow her to work around cinematic and censorship regulations; and to abandon the stale and uncinematic styles and systems of Malaysian mainstream cinema. This is similar to the André Bazin led *Cahiers* group sidestepping the "sclerotic" and "ossified" French cinema (Hayward 1996). François Truffaut, through *Cahiers*, dubbed French Cinema "*le papa de cinema*" for its tedious repetitions of monotonously script-led films devoid of social realism and redolent with safe psychology. In short, she produced works capable of winning against the system (Sarris 1968). This allows Yasmin Ahmad films to be comparable to the "auteur versus scenario-led films" of the French New Wave, as she controls the themes, subject matter, production, exhibition and distribution of her films.

In positioning Yasmin Ahmad as auteur, her filmmaking independence has given her greater control in preserving the artistic and aesthetic qualities of all her films. This sense of independence, from *Rabun* to *Talentine*, also allows her to contest multiculturalism by

moving beyond multiculturalism. In this move beyond multiculturalism, her films similarly envision a utopian post ethnic cosmopolitan Malaysian society.<sup>2</sup> As cosmopolitanism suggests the creation of new transnational networks that identify with a moral concern for humanity regardless of borders, Yasmin Ahmad's films do so by criticising multiculturalism as its limitations have grown gradually noticeable and the concept has become obsolete (Hollinger 1995: 2–3). This is because post ethnicity proposes the study of ethnicity "beyond multiculturalism" through its support and criticisms of elements of multiculturalism (Hollinger 1995: 2–3). Firstly, multiculturalism has become too much about expressing differences and does not permit the expression of individual ethnic identity (Hollinger 1995: 3). Secondly, the politics of multiculturalism has become a sensitive and possible volatile issue through its management of ethnic community relationships. Thirdly, as a modern technology of the government managing the modern nation-state, it segregates society into an absolute society with no shared sense of identity, operating without a sense of being a singular imagined community, with no unified cultural nationalism (Ang 2010: 3–5). As multiculturalism has "outgrown itself", it no longer provides a solid orientation toward cultural diversity to negotiate current conflicts and convergences (Hollinger 1995: 1–2). While her films that adopt a post ethnic perspective do not discard multiculturalism, they move "beyond multiculturalism" as the limitations of multiculturalism have become gradually noticeable as the concept has become obsolete.

Yasmin Ahmad as auteur has consistently adopted a post ethnic and cosmopolitan approach as cosmopolitanism confronts and recognises diversity without discriminating between nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, race or identity (van Hooft 2009: 5). As cosmopolitanism recognises diversity without categorising according to nationality, ethnicity, religion, language and race, cosmopolitanism recognises and protects cultural diversity, as individuals are concurrently positioned as outsiders and insiders, as individuals and group members, as self and the other, as local and global (Rumford 2007: 3). This acknowledgement

of solidarity with a multiplicity of others allows for the engagement with the "Other" as extensively as possible.

Yasmin Ahmad films use technical consistencies and creative and production control, with a recognisable and recurrent stylistic signature. In terms of funding, her films have been both self-financed and/or financed by FINAS grants. For example, whilst waiting for a FINAS loan approval for *Sepet*, Yasmin raised her own funds by using her savings while her art director sold his car. In terms of production, she worked closely with a large multi-ethnic film crew with individual and specialised roles to contest the Malay-ness in Malaysian cinema. She also supports the productions and career of fellow filmmakers and is fondly remembered as an easy to approach, supportive and encouraging individual. For example, Yasmin willingly sponsored Tan Chui Mui for her short film *A Tree in Tanjung Malim* (2004) on the condition that Tan would finance Liew Seng Tat's *Flower in the Pocket* should she win an award.<sup>3</sup> Yasmin also practiced role switching with other filmmakers to share her knowledge and expertise in filmmaking while prominently featuring in their films. She appears in Ho Yuhang's *Min* (2003), *Rain Dogs* (2006) and *At the End of Daybreak* (2009); in Amir Muhammad's *Susuk* (2008); and makes a cameo appearance in *S'kali* (2006). She is also executive producer for Azharr Rudin's short films *Raining Amber* (2005) and *The Amber Sexalogy* (2006). In terms of distribution and exhibition, commercial and independent companies such as Columbia Tristar Pictures and Lighthouse Pictures distribute her films. Her films (except *Rabun*) exhibited at international film festivals before premiering in Malaysia due to her choice of dealing with politically, culturally, and religiously sensitive topics. Despite this, all her films are award winning and critically acclaimed. In terms of cinematography, she uses 35mm film celluloid (except for *Rabun*, which uses digital technology) to shoot her films. The *mise-en-scène* and aesthetic qualities in her films are simple, less conventional and non-dramatic.

She reduces the melodramatic influences in her films by employing non-professional actors and favouring long-takes. The usage of long takes, long shots, silence and camera placements at a distance are typical methods in her films and are reflective of Tsai Ming-

Liang's approaches. Her films however depart from Tsai's as she uses these methods to allow for human emotions and feelings to slowly unfold through the employment of melodrama. She also favours locations that put forth feelings of simplicity such as schools, old houses, Malay villages (*kampungs*) or even the streets of small towns such as Ipoh over posh and glamorous locations. Even the settings in her films are kept to a bare minimum. In terms of cinematic narratives, her films unconventionally lack the existence of the lone protagonist. She instead uses multiethnic characters that simultaneously drive her films' plot. These multiethnic characters are everyday people similarly struggling with everyday issues such as the collapse of family values and relationships, emotional problems, and identity politics. These usages of "slice of life" depictions are aimed at stimulating the intelligence and emotions of her audiences as ethnic, religious, sexual and social injustice are issues already familiar to Malaysians.

Her films are described as "poetry in the lives of everyday and ordinary people" for they use cosmopolitan values to deeply examine the lives of ordinary Malaysians (Agusta 2004). These values, which blur the boundaries between ethnic communities also allow her films to become "deeply personal and intensely humanistic" (Catsoulis 2008). Her cinematic characters also capably converse interchangeably in *Manglish*, English, Chinese dialects, and *Bahasa* Malaysia.<sup>4</sup> This usage of polylingualism challenges the notion that "Malaysian-ness" in Malaysian cinema means only speaking in Malay. Polylingualism provides recognition of the hybridity and co-existence of the different cultures in Malaysia. Using an assortment of languages, Manglish, and Chinese dialects, the film appealed not only to Malaysian audiences but also to overseas audiences. The employment of such characteristics enables Malaysian audiences to identify with the characters of the film. These elements of such simplicity also denote a sense of straightforwardness, capable of moving beyond multiculturalism as understood by both local and overseas audiences. Lastly, her films often end ambiguously. This form of ending deconstructs and fragments the narrative line as an expected resolution is often not given. These endings serve as an open invitation for the audiences' critical interpretation.

The employment of such independence in the making of her films has allowed Yasmin Ahmad to command greater control while preserving her artistic and aesthetic qualities.

### **THE PARADOX OF MOVING BEYOND MULTICULTURALISM**

The films of Yasmin Ahmad are best described as a form of social critique and commentary. As the most prolific Malaysian filmmaker since P. Ramlee, her works and ideological preferences are similar to his. Yasmin daringly exposes on the cinematic screen taboos and hypocrisies of society, a feat unachievable by any Malaysian filmmaker since P. Ramlee. Rather than merely focusing on issues about race and ethnicity, her works, like P. Ramlee's, are criticisms about the failings of the Malaysian society and in particular the Malays. Her works however, depart when she paradoxically employs multiethnic themes to criticise society's ignorance and tendency on turning a blind eye against racial prejudice and chauvinism. Her films achieve this by highlighting how this nation hypocritically proclaims itself as a tolerant multiethnic nation; yet continues to profoundly emphasise elements of race and ethnicity. She highlights this hypocrisy through stories of multiethnic characters who continue to face obstacles and barriers created by certain quarters that frown upon interethnic relationships in Malaysia.<sup>5</sup> Her films, which intertwine romance with religious and ethnic conflicts, are drawn from her personal experience of being married interethnically.<sup>6</sup> Her interethnic matrimonial experience is demonstrated through the recurrent employment of the stereotypical "boy meets girl" storyline in all her films.

The usage of ethnic terms in labelling her characters as "Chinese", "Malay" (as evident on the *Sepet* film poster) or even "Indian" inadvertently places ethnic referencing upon her characters. This unintentionally redirects the focus of her films, which is about relationship struggles to one about ethnic and religious contestation. This occurred simply because it is not uncommon for Malaysians to be recognised and labelled according to one's ethnicity and religion. As such, a film about the struggles of lovers has been misinterpreted as

a film about ethnic contestation simply due to the different ethnic and religious backgrounds of the characters. For example, *Sepet*, *Gubra*, *Muallaf* and *Talentine* are films that are not about race, ethnicity or religion, but about individuals from different backgrounds who fall in love. Yasmin defends this perspective of her films by stating that racism was merely used as an excuse to conceal human weaknesses such as fear or greed (Yasmin 2004). This statement is also present in the film as Orked states her point of view about interethnic love affairs after her friend Lin teases her about having a preference for Chinese men. In her defence, Orked tells Lin, "You like who you like. Who cares if that someone likes the other someone because of their race? It's when you hate them, that's the problem". As such, her film dealing with the struggles of two teenage lovers has been misinterpreted as a film about the contestation of ethnicity. As an auteur, Yasmin's ability to keep the focus on post ethnicity and cosmopolitanism can be seen as her signature across all her films including *Sepet*.

To further stress this point, it has to be highlighted that the problems and conflicts the characters face during courtship do not arise due to their religious or ethnic differences. For example, the need to "condition" the love between Orked and Jason according to their ethnic or religious backgrounds does not happen in *Sepet*. It does not occur between Orked and Alan in *Gubra*, neither does it happen between Brian and Ani in *Muallaf*, nor between Mahesh and Melur in *Talentine*. By deliberately ignoring ethnic and religious differences, the narratives in these films instead capture the tension and anxieties often caused by the complexity and contradiction due to the demands and restrictions of a modernising society. As such, her films refuse to become lodged as mere discussions of race and ethnicity and move beyond discussion of multiculturalism. By moving beyond multiculturalism, she uses cosmopolitan themes of humour, love and humanism to highlight the everyday problems of everyday people.

Despite being labelled the "taboo-breaker of Malaysian cinema" (*The National* 2009), Yasmin Ahmad persistently discusses the "sensitive" issue of interethnic relations to paradoxically highlight the struggles faced by common Malaysians within and between

cultures and religions. Such forms of discussions are done to maintain the illusion of her dreamed image that Malaysia remains as an objective mirror of the actual nation. Along these lines, her commercially oriented films with independent features continue to resist official discourse of "Malaysian-ness". Instead of employing the stereotypical storylines of mainstream Malaysian cinema using elements of love (*suka*), sadness (*duka*) and humour (*jenaka*), Yasmin continues to employ cosmopolitan themes to maintain the blurring of ethnic and racial boundaries to demonstrate the possibility of co-existence. The use of cosmopolitan themes challenges the Malay psyche, the already established Malay cinematic identity and conventions of mainstream Malaysian cinema. The usage of cosmopolitanism allows the film's narrative, characters, themes and subject matter to resist the Malay psyche by demonstrating the struggles faced by common Malaysians within and between cultures and religions.<sup>7</sup> Using cosmopolitanism, her films become platforms of contestation and renegotiation of national identity. Cosmopolitanism thus allows Yasmin to contest social, cultural and political issues closely related to Malaysians. In 2006, Yasmin, in an interview (posted on her blog) with Lorna Tee of Focus Films, clarifies her embrace of cosmopolitanism in her films. This cosmopolitan and liberal outlook examines the lives of "everyday people" in their daily struggles with emotional upheavals (as discussed in the previous section about the auteur filmmaking system). In justifying the universal values of love, hope and humanism that has influenced her works, she modestly sees herself as an individual holding "up a mirror to Mankind" and as a filmmaker observing "the human condition" caused by the different cultures in multiracial Malaysia, if not the world. This constant focus throughout her body of work on cosmopolitan themes and subject matter allows her films to be universally understood as these issues blur the boundaries of ethno-racial communities.

Yasmin Ahmad moves beyond multiculturalism by producing films that cross cultural and religious barriers. Her films that are "all about feelings" remind her audiences about the importance of love, respect, and tolerance (Bissme 2006). In *Gubra* for example, Bilal shows love and compassion by empathetically caring for a wounded stray dog and dispenses religious

advice to a sex worker named Temah. The final scenes in the film also highlight the possibility of reconciliation through forgiveness, as Alan's parents who have been at odds for years reunite. In *Sepet*, the parents of Orked and Jason never opposed their relationship due to their ethnic and religious differences. Orked's mother instead describes him as "a well-mannered boy although he works as a pirated DVD vendor". Despite being labelled as a "criminal", the broken-hearted Jason still manages to find solace in his mother. As he stares into thin air contemplating his fate, his mother states, "I know why you're sad. You're in love with a Malay girl, aren't you? Don't worry son, I'm not angry with you". Jason then buries his head in her lap. This statement by Jason's Malay speaking mother not only becomes a conscious departure from the conventions of mainstream Malaysian cinema, but also from the need for ethnic identification. This humanistic display of a mother's unconditional love for her son is recorded through Yasmin Ahmad's statement, "I cried when I was writing it. My crew cried when we were shooting the scene and when the film was played in cinemas, the audience cried too," (Faridul 2008). Such an open display of self-effacing emotion departs from the over-exaggerated melodramatic elements of mainstream Malaysian cinema. This allows her films to appeal to the intelligence and human emotions of both Malaysian and overseas audiences. In doing so, her films move beyond the conventions of mainstream Malaysian cinema and away from the focus of race and ethnicity.

As her films move beyond multiculturalism, Yasmin Ahmad also presents a liberal and alternative outlook of the Malay community. She achieves this by contesting the Malay psyche and uses Orked and her middle class family in *Sepet*, *Gurbra* and *Mukhsin* to deconstruct the homogenous portrayal of Malay families in mainstream Malaysian cinema. Orked's family is portrayed as a simple middle-class family living a modest life in a house with minimal furniture. Even her father, Pak Atan drives an old car. This deconstructs the official state envisioning of wealthy middle-class Malays in mainstream Malaysian cinema, which often portray Malays living lavishly in huge mansions, driving posh vehicles, working in high positions in multi-million dollar corporations and being key-figures in society. This

deconstruction represents a rhetorical shift in Malaysian cinema and demonstrates a liberal outlook of how Malay(sian)s need not be contained within ethnic and religious boundaries. Yasmin's idea of deconstructing onscreen Malays through the portrayal of a liberal Malay family was however, not well accepted. For example, her liberal and intimate portrayal of Malays through Orked's family was deemed as indecent because LPF felt that the portrayal of Malay women dressed in *berkembangan* was too revealing and unsuitable.<sup>8</sup> Besides the bathing scene of the old couple in *Rabun*, LPF also asked for scenes in *Sepet* to be removed. These scenes are of Orked's parents, Pak Atan and Mak Inom discussing affectionately in bed about Orked's relationship; and of Orked, Mak Inom, their maid, Kak Yam and Pak Atan seated on a staircase dressed in *berkembangan* combing each other's hair. While Yasmin retained these scenes, she removed a scene of Pak Atan's *sarong* dropping to reveal him wearing nothing but his underwear.

The contestation of the Malay psyche has led to her films being heavily criticised by a Malay mainstream newspaper. This criticism sparked debates and arguments to transpire on the Internet, academic circles and in Parliament. Her films *Sepet* and *Gubra* were then designated as "*pencemar budaya*" (cultural smearing), a designation that emerged from a forum titled *Sepet dan Gubra Pencemar Budaya* (*Sepet* and *Gubra*, Corrupters of the Malay Culture). The nationally televised forum questioned the potential negative consequences of her films depicting inter-ethnic relationships and how this might corrupt the Malay culture. In the forum, statements such as "*Malaysia Melayu punya*" (Malaysia belongs to the Malays) and "*Orked sebagai perempuan Melayu digambarkan mempunyai didikan agama yang teguh tetapi dia hanya sesuai untuk seorang lelaki Cina penjual CD dan VCD haram yang boleh dikategorikan sebagai penjenayah*" (How could Orked, a Malay girl portrayed with a firm religious background, be possibly matched with a Chinese criminal that peddles bootlegged CDs and VCDs?) were made. The forum also questioned how Orked of firm Islamic upbringing could be in a courtship with a Chinese *kafir* (infidel) with a problematic background. This employment of racial statements indicates a sense of anxiety as the self feels threatened by the

Other and when status quo is challenged. Discussions related to the difficulty of this "shared space of representation" continued in Parliament when *Sepet* was described as "nothing great" for it does not reflect the Malaysian national identity. This statement however was not centred on the concept of the Malaysian national identity, but about how the free thinking Orked was not an ideal image of a Malay woman. Despite having a solid religious background she fell in love with a "Chinese criminal". Despite facing such criticisms, Yasmin Ahmad persistently adopts the postethnic approach in her films to demonstrate how the Malaysian nation building process remains incomplete.

Yasmin's employment of cosmopolitanism in envisioning a postethnic nation has allowed the characters in her films to have a liberal outlook that overcame religious and ethnic barriers. This is in line with her role as an auteur, for throughout her body of work she has continuously maintained her authoring of a postethnic Malaysian landscape by discussing issues related to ethnicity, race and religion, while upholding her cinematic style that incorporates both independent and commercial features.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed how Yasmin Ahmad through her films and personality has influenced and altered the landscape of contemporary Malaysian cinema. She has achieved this through her competencies in cinematic techniques and constant challenge towards stereotypes, discrimination and injustice. Her films therefore suggest that Malaysia is better conceptualised as a single yet diverse/heterogeneous community; and not as a nation of separate ethnicities and absolute races. As such, the focus of her films move beyond discussions about race and ethnicity to discuss issues greatly related to the Malaysian society. This allows her films to continue envisioning an imaginary postethnic nation transcending cultural differences.

Her filmmaking career however only lasted six years. As an auteur "granted insufficient time to reach her full potential" (Edwards 2009), she prematurely died in 2009

whilst planning two feature films: a Japanese co-production called *Wasurenagusa* and a Singaporean film *Go Thaddeus!* While her death marks the end of her vision of a postethnic nation, she continues to generate an impact in cinema. In recognition of her work, she was posthumously awarded with the Best Director Award at the 54th Asia-Pacific Film Festival (APFF) in Taipei, while discussion about her films continue over the media, academic circles, forums, conferences and online.

## NOTES

1. Yasmin Ahmad was at the time holding a position with advertising agency Leo Burnett Malaysia. She holds a degree in Arts majoring in politics and psychology from Newcastle University in England.
2. In defence of her works being accused of romantically imagining a utopian Malaysia, a seemingly puzzled Yasmin states (through her blog) that she fails to understand how her films are depicted as utopian. She states that although her films contain moments of light-heartedness and humour, her films are actually "quite dark" with instances of embezzlement (*Rabun*), death (*Sepet* and *Gubra*) and heartbreak (*Mukhsin*).
3. This fact was mentioned during my personal conversation with Wong Tuck Cheong on 26 July 2010, in Kuala Lumpur.
4. The term "*Manglish*" is a portmanteau between "Malaysian English" or "Mangled English". It is an informal vocabulary of incorrect grammar that loosely combines a mixture of English, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese dialects and Tamil words in a conversation (not all dialects have to be present in the same sentence). Its use is neither derogatory nor demeaning. *Manglish* is also often referred to as *Bahasa Rojak*, in reference to the mixture of languages. *Manglish* is often complemented with the term – *Lah* at the end of sentences.

5. Yasmin ignores the ethnic history by highlighting society's resistance to inter-ethnic relationships. Such differences are brought about by the issue of conversion, a change in identity and lifestyles, and societal and familial objections, as marriage between a Muslim and non-Muslim can become a site of contestation involving individuals, families, communities and state; this leads towards contestations between conservative and liberal Islamic forces (Jones, Chee and Maznah 2009, 3).
6. In the event of a marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim, non-Muslims are required by law to convert to Islam. In effect, marriage and divorce become issues intricately mixed with religious conversion (Jones, Chee and Maznah 2009: 2–3).
7. Yasmin Ahmad withdrew *Sepet's* participation in the 50th Asia Pacific Film Festival due to the immense negative criticism the film received from certain quarters. The filmmaker also stated that threats were made against her should the film be in the running at the festival.
8. *Berkemban* is the dressing of women in a *sarong* tied at the midriff or at the chest. The *berkemban* drew controversy in *Perempuan, Isteri dan ...?* when the character Zaleha was shown taking a bath in the *sarong* tied at the chest. The *berkemban* drew controversy again in *Rabun*, when the characters of Pak Atan and Mak Inom were shown bathing each other dressed in *sarongs*.

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