

Book Reviews

Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature. By Khoo Gaik Cheng. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006. 254 pp.

The 1990s marked a sort of coming of age for Malaysia with a new found affluence in the post-New Economic Policy era and growing pluralism in politics spurred by the proliferation of civil society groups. Internationally, the spillovers of the Islamic movement fuelled a similar resurgence in Malaysia in the 1980s. How have these economic and political developments translated into the cultural landscape of the nation?

Malaysian academic Khoo Gaik Cheng's first book deals with this central question. Hers is an interdisciplinary study examining the literature and films of the country in the last two decades. It is set within a gamut of anthropological, sociological, and gender frameworks, which can be sometimes bewildering. But the main thread binding this broad survey is her assertion that Malaysian film and writing reflect how modernity has enabled the conscious or unconscious recuperation of 'Adat'.

Adat refers to the wide-ranging set of traditional, unwritten codes regulating social, political, and economic aspects of life in Malaysia and Indonesia. Adat pre-dated the arrival of Islam in the archipelago but was later syncretized with the religion, its practices still prevalent today. However the move towards a purist form of Islam in Malaysia in the early 1990s subverted aspects of adat which were deemed unislamic. In the book, those aspects of adat which were "reclaimed" largely dealt with sexuality or forms of the archaic, such as magic or traditional healing.

The 1990s established a new breed of, what Khoo terms, 'bumigeois' or middle-class Malays, whose writings are the main focus of the book. Karim Raslan, Rehman Rashid, Amir Mohammed and Salleh Ben Joned are all Malay, male, and represent four generations of Malaysian authors writing in English. It is their unusual position as minorities (westernized and liberal) within a majority (Malay and Muslim), which Khoo believes allows them to enunciate the struggles within the Malaysian psyche. Their writings portray the ambivalence of the nation — the hybridities of race and language, the negotiation of religion and their privileged status as 'bumiputra', sons of the soil.

But Khoo's strength really lies in her rich textual analysis and in depth understanding of Malaysian films. Malaysian national cinema is a Cinema of Denial, one that suppresses the realities of race relations or of the changing role of females in society. The main hindrances are structural as filmmakers are hemmed in by self censorship, state ideology, and repressive legislation such as the Internal Security Act. Yet she reveals an increasing maturity in domestic commercial cinema as well as new independent productions in circumventing boundaries through the use of irony and parody. These films challenge the incoming influences of Arabized Islam and globalization and treatment of historically sensitive topics.

Taking a keen interest in gender, Khoo devotes two chapters to the representations of the Malay woman and Malay man in contemporary literature and film. While the portrayals of the modern female vary from the chaste Muslim wife to the sexualized, successful career woman, the Malay male seems stuck in a patriarchal stereotype, helpless in dealing with the empowered female and resorting to violence to reassert his dominant position. On the whole there is a greater boldness and openness when addressing gender bilateralism and homosexuality in the work of younger authors and filmmakers.

The only grouse about the book is her focus on the select group of 'bumigeois'. It begs the question — what about other Chinese, Indian, and female Malaysian writers and filmmakers? By omitting these marginalized groups, the study ends up as an examination of the

Malay cultural landscape, albeit with more multiracial perspectives, but not quite a Malaysian one. Perhaps Khoo makes up for it with her inputs as the narrator.

Somewhat fuzzy is also how adat ties everything together. Are the themes of liberalism(,) sexuality (and) or the primordial exhibited in contemporary Malaysian film and writing always an unconscious or deliberate reclamation of adat? I would think the interaction between Islam, adat, and modern influences would be more complex and intrinsic.

Reclaiming Adat embarked on a grand and intricate task of dissecting the cultural landscape of modern Malaysia and by most counts it succeeds. It is a welcome and important addition to the limited discourse on contemporary film and literature in Malaysia.

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