

# SOAP OPERA AS A SITE FOR ENGAGING WITH MODERNITY AMONGST MALAY WOMEN IN MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to situate soap opera as a popular vehicle for Malay women in contemporary Malaysia to engage with an increasingly globally oriented form of transnational modernity. While this study employs a textual analysis to examine this television genre, it argues that non-Western soap opera provides sense of modernity to the local audience particularly Malay women through various representations of consumer culture and its potential as a site for escapism and a channel for mediated reality. Through an insight into the role of a non-Western soap opera as a privileged site for engaging with modernity amongst Malay women, this article provides a clearer understanding of television's role and its representation in the Malay world.

*Keywords: non-western soap opera, television genre, consumer culture, media representation, popular culture*

## INTRODUCTION

The popularity of non-Western soaps from Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Philippines and Latin America illustrates changes in the mediascape, the flow and consumption of cultural texts in Malaysia. The popularity of non-Western soaps in Malaysia is perhaps unrivalled by any other form of mass-mediated popular culture. The success of non-Western soaps in garnering audiences in Malaysia has also made its impact on the cultural landscape of the nation too. As a journalist for *The New Sunday Times* put it, "the unconscious humming of the theme from *Winter Sonata* as we cook and clean, the smiles that appear on our faces as the South American beauties or bedroom-eyed heroes float across our computer screens" (John, Davis and Chelvi 2003a). The diligence and devotion with which audiences watch these soaps is quite staggering. As the reporter notes, "Many give the 'are you crazy?' look at the suggestion of making a phone call during soap." Further the daily routine of family life is altered and constructed to facilitate time for these soaps. Not only are other social activities like gatherings interrupted, "many hosts are in disbelief

when guests magically vanish from the party just before a soap is due to start” (John, Davis and Chelvi 2003a).

The generic format of a soap opera draws both Western and non-Western versions too, “as a pleasurable escape. Wives forget their drab husbands and drab lives” and “consider the higher things in life—murder, mayhem, political wrangling, scandals, family squabbles and, above all else, love” (John, Davis and Chelvi 2003a). In interviews conducted amongst Malay women followers of the genre, the responses point to the appeal of the soap opera as escapist entertainment. Speaking about the Latin American telenovela *Betty Yo Soy La Fea* (Betty, the Ugly) a Malay woman working as a professional says, “Betty was easy to follow, funny and features a hero and a heroine with flaws—from their physical appearance to their personalities—unlike other series I have seen where the characters are almost perfect” (Farinordin 2003). A housewife was equally enamoured with the same series for its melodramatic, suspenseful narrative ending with a happy denouement for the heroine, in the manner of a typical soap storyline. She says, “I cried ... I am so happy for her ... before this, I was afraid of how the ending would turn out, but I am so relieved now. It is the best *telenovela* I have seen till date (sic)” (Farinordin 2003).

Questions need to be asked—what makes non-Western soaps a unique and popular object for Malay women? One defining feature of the genre of non-Western soaps is the representation of modernity. Modernity is a subjective term. It has malleable meaning which changes according to how it is perceived in different contexts. While many scholars—Giddens (1990), Gaonkar (2001), Felski (1995), Kahn (2001), Stivens (2006), etc.—have various views about modernity, this article will focus on the elements in soap opera which generates the sense of modernity. Although modernity and modernisation are deeply interrelated notions, I should differentiate between the two concepts. Modernisation is about the transformation process, which comes about through a highly involved relationship between the political structure and the economy. On the other hand, modernity can be defined as the cultural change that accompanies these processes of modernisation of economy and politics. However, what are the most favoured elements of a sense of modernity derived from non-Western soaps?

In this article, I argue soap opera generate a sense of modernity amongst Malay women because this television genre provides various representations of consumer culture; and act as escapism outlet and a channel of mediated reality. This article is divided into four main sections. The first section focuses on the phenomenon of non-Western soap opera among Malay women. The second section will deal with the definition of soap opera as television genre to establish a background for understanding its format, content and structure; the third is concerned with the relationship of soap opera as a women-oriented genre; and the last, I will highlight three major aspects of soap opera as a popular platform for providing a sense of modernity.

## **NON-WESTERN SOAP OPERA IN MALAYSIA**

The introduction of non-Western soaps in Malaysia began in the 1980s. But now non-Western soaps have completely overtaken other genres as the most popular television genre with astronomical viewership ratings, particularly among Malay

women, who have been identified as the main audience of this genre (Bidin 2003; Hamzah 2006; John, Damis and Chelvi 2003a). Malay women have been identified as a large follower of this television genre. In fact, many debates in the Malaysian parliament and political meeting have focussed the close association of Malay women and popular soap opera on television (Saharani 2007; Bernama 2007a; Hamzah 2006) While the popularity of non-Western soaps in Malaysia will create an interest toward specific rating analysis in order to show audience shares for different genres of programmes on television, particularly identifying how these shows regularly viewed by the Malay audiences especially women in specific age range, I have to argue here that the constitution of popularity, as claimed by Lewis (2002), have various definitions and justifications. In fact, what constitutes “popular” has to be deemed in terms of cultural and atmosphere as well as methodological setting.

According to Lewis (2002: 282-283), there are several techniques which have been employed by the media industry to measure popularity of specific cultural texts such as computerised recording systems through TV “people meters”. AGB Nielsen is well known for applying this technique for measuring popularity of specific television program on television. Website visits or “hits” can also be used to identify “popularity” of cultural text over any given time period. Apparently, these techniques are useful to study popularity but it is insufficient to evaluate specific “phenomenon” which usually came out later as a major outcome. In other words, by presenting daily specific rating figure of specific television program will not suggest that it is becoming a phenomenon among audiences. In my study, non-Western soap operas is a “cultural phenomenon” because it is not only popular amongst the Malay audience but became a major subject for the local authorities especially UMNO to criticise Malay women for ignoring their domestic task and communal activities. For example, the manners of Wanita UMNO’s members who were too busy watching *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah* (shallot and garlic) and caused lower attendance at the UMNO’s national general meeting can be justified as a new cultural phenomenon which is hard-pressed to explain.

In spite of the fact that these non-Western soaps are not dubbed into Malay language and need to be watched with subtitles, the appetite for non-Western soaps continues to grow among Malay audiences. Given the high literacy rate across the population in contemporary Malaysia, non-Western soaps are not even dubbed into Malay but shown with subtitles thereby making the broadcasting process easier and the programmes more profitable for television channels (Hussien 2001). Under the political umbrella of the “Look East Policy” launched in the early 1980s, the government also advised the state run Television Malaysia to import and broadcast more television programmes from Japan and South Korea. In the 1980s, Japanese soaps such as *Oshin* and *Rin Hanne Konma* were dubbed into Malay and broadcast on local television. The stories depicted in these soaps were different from the consumerist middle class American lifestyle of *Dallas*. For example, the period drama *Oshin* tells the story of a young Japanese peasant girl who grows up and experiences different challenges in her life (Hussien 2001). Hashim (1989: 125) notes that RTM and TV3 also introduced a special afternoon slot called *Chinese Belt*, which showed many soaps from Hong Kong and China to attract local Chinese-speaking audiences in Malaysia. The promotion of non-Western soaps had a significant effect on the viewing predilections of the audiences. Japanese soap like *Rin Hane Konma*

was ranked ninth among the nation's ten most popular TV programmes (Kyodo News International 1988) and usurped the place of American soaps like *Dallas*. Consequently, there was a huge influx of soaps from Japan in the mid-1990s till early 2000s. Soaps like *Beautiful Life*, *Concerto* and *Power Office Girl* commanded high ratings and some were even shifted to the prime time slot at night (Hussien 2001).

South Korea was another significant contributor to the wave of non-Western soaps. The most popular Korean production is *Winter Sonata* which commanded 1.3 millions followers per episode on a daily basis. The popularity of Korean soaps in Malaysia also sparked off appetite for Korean films, pop music and fashion. This phenomenon has been identified as "Korean wave" (*hallyu*) (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). The Korean wave in soaps has continued with popular serials like *Jewel in the Palace*, *My Love Affair*, *Autumn Fairy Tale*, *Joyful Girl* and *My Love Patsi*. A good storyline, beautiful scenery, universal themes and attractive actors are thought to be the recipe for the success of Korean soaps (Farinordin 2003). The popularity of South Korean popular culture is also accompanied by a celebrity culture of adulation for their actors. The Korean pop star and actor Jung Ji Hoon, also known as Rain, is arguably the biggest star in Malaysia now.

In the early 2000s, television soaps from other Southeast Asian countries began to appear on television channels in Malaysia. Romance soaps from the Philippines *Pangako Sa'yo* (My promise to you) and *Sana'y Wala Nang Wakas* (I wish it would never end) were not only being watched by large numbers, but were becoming a topic of everyday conversations among people (John, Davis and Chelvi 2003a). The absorption of Filipino soaps into the daily lives of people was complemented by the tabloid press, which would circulate stories about the private lives of the lead actor and actress of *Pangako Sa'yo*, Jericho Rosales and Kristine Hermosa (Tiong 2006). The Thai soaps *Phoenix Blood*, *Maid from Chicago*, *Heaven Meets Earth* and *Soda & Ice* also became popular with audiences, reaching the peak of their popularity in the early to mid 2000s. These soaps also capitalised on the exotic scenery of foreign settings like New Zealand (Yin 2003).

Another important source of non-Western soaps is Latin America. Although Latin American soaps do not fit neatly into the slot of the generic non-Western soap—due to elements of relatively open depiction of sexual matters and their historical association with European culture and language—it is important to understand why this status has been granted to Latin American soaps. The justification made by the Malaysian authorities is that Latin American nations inhabit a similar space of cultural evolution of rapid modernisation and economic development as Malaysia. Latin American soaps not only tell stories that Malaysians can relate to but they offer content with a more balanced Western influence (Bernama 2007b). In fact, authorities have argued that Latin soaps are not in contradiction to local culture and they fit within the broadcast guidelines of the Malaysian television (Bernama 2007b). As per the Malaysian broadcast code and ethics, any foreign content must not go against the vision and sensitivity of the multicultural Malaysian nation (Department of Malaysian Broadcasting 2010). Latin American soaps are also accepted by the Malay audiences for portraying stories that share similarities with Asian cultural norms. Lau reports that habitual followers of Colombian soap, *Yo Soy Betty La Fea* (Betty, The Ugly) are avid followers of this popular soap because 'the culture and stories of these countries are similar to Asian society' (Lau 2003). Themes like family issues,

parent-child relationships and marital love pervade non-Western soaps, whether they are from Asia or Latin America, with lesser emphases on individualism or sexual intrigue as in most Western soaps.

After the abortive attempt by the state to produce local soaps in the 1980s, the phenomenon of Latin American soaps really took off in Malaysia with the deregulation of the industry in the early 2000s. The Venezuelan soap called *Maria Mercedes* on NTV7, was screened all weekdays from Monday to Friday and attracted more than 600,000 viewers per episode (Farinordin 2003). The success of *Maria Mercedes* encouraged NTV7 to broadcast many other Latin American soaps like *Mis Tres Hermanas* (My Three Sisters) and *La Usurpadora* (The Pretender), *Yo Soy Betty La Fea* (I Am Betty the Ugly One) and *Juana La Virgen* (Juana's Miracle). Ratings for these soaps were high, between 400,000 to 900,000 viewers for each episode (Farinordin 2003). The popularity of Latin American soap operas also attracted the interest of other local television networks like RTM and TV3. The afternoon slot on RTM which showed a series of Spanish-language soap operas like *El Amor No Es Como Lo Pintan* (Love Is Not How People Make It out to be) and *Por Tu Amor* (For Your Love) attracted 1.3 million viewers. The climax to this phenomenon of popularity of Latin American soaps came in 2002, when TV3 aired the Mexican family soap *Rosalinda* claimed a record viewership 2.6 million viewers per episode. The lead actress of the soap Thalia who is also a pop singer, became a star in Malaysia and her theme song *Ay-Amor*, *Rosalinda* became a popular song.

Although Korean and Latin American soaps can be said to have been the most popular programmes among audiences in the early 2000s, soaps from Indonesia currently claim the highest place in the popularity ratings. From 2006 Indonesian soap operas, locally known as *Sinetron*, were broadcast on most local television channels and almost wiped out any remnants of local Malaysian soaps which had survived the earlier onslaught of foreign non-Western soaps. The TV3 afternoon slot, which screened the Indonesian soap *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* (Shallot and Garlic) from early 2006, attracted an astronomical viewership of about four million viewers per episode (Saharani 2007a). The fantastical elements and riveting storyline based on supernatural themes attracted the audiences in droves. This figure is believed to be the highest rating for any soap opera in Malaysia. Many reasons are given for the popularity of Indonesian soaps—from cultural proximity to good production values. But it has also been noted that it is the supernatural storyline of the soap based on local, indigenous folklore shared by people in Malaysia and Indonesia which has attracted local audiences in Malaysia. This is a subject that was never touched in the storyline of soaps from other regions and even banned on Malaysian television for many years (Bernama 2007a; Hamzah 2006; Saharani 2007a). This trend of “supernatural” soaps from Indonesia continued with *Bukan Cinderella* (Not Cinderella) and *Liontin*, broadcast by Media Prima through its associate television station TV3. Apart from these supernatural soaps, Indonesian soaps of romance and family life like *Ratapan Anak Tiri* (Grief of the step children), *Malim Kundang*, *Romantika Shanghai* (Shanghai Romance) and *Kenapa ada Cinta?* (Why is love?) were broadcast on RTM. *Kawin Muda* (Early Marriage) was aired on a daily basis from Monday to Friday (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2008). In fact, the popularity of Indonesian soaps has reached such an astronomical height that ASTRO, a local satellite television station, introduced a 24 hour *Sinetron* channel called *Aruna* which

currently screens an array of Indonesian soap operas such as *Maha Pengasih* (The Most Blessed), *Mewarnai Langit* (Painting the Sky), *Akibat Banyak Gaul* (Too many relationships), *Perempuan* (Women), *Samson Betawi*, *Roman Picisan* (Lousy Romance), *Suami-Suami Takut Istri* (Husbands Afraid of Wives) and *Titipan Ilahi* (Gift from God) (*Utusan Malaysia* 2008).

## DEFINING SOAP OPERA: FORMAT, CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

A soap opera can be described as “a continuing fictional dramatic television program, presented in multiple serial instalments each week, through a narrative composed of interlocking storylines that focus on the relationships within a specific community of characters” (Mumford 1995: 18). Many scholars like Hobson (1982), Ang (1985), Buckingham (1987) and Geraghty (1991) also agree with these characterisations of the soap opera as a long running, episodic television programmes with fictional stories of romance, family and relationships that cater to women audiences. Given these broad conventions, soap operas can be said to constitute a genre in their own right, despite the immense variety in the field.

In calling the soap opera a genre, one must note that the notion of a genre as a classificatory label is important for any television content. Genre not only serves to classify and market an item as a product of a certain recognisable category, but fundamentally operates as a way in which meaning is structured in any cultural text. As John Frow contends, “genre is a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning” (Frow 2006: 10). A genre imparts structure to a text, organises its content, creates audience expectations and delivers meaning to them through that mutually understood structure. Thus, it is not an overstatement to say that genre “is a fundamental aspect of the way texts of all kind are understood” (Neale 2001: 1). Soap opera as televisual content is governed by certain parameters, which also help to define it as a genre and I will attempt to detail some of these conventions.

Firstly, the essential feature of a soap opera is its episodic nature. Soaps follow a “serialised narrative in broadcasting” which must be screened on a regular basis, normally on a daily or weekly basis (McCarthy 2001: 47). This serialised format of presentation is such a crucial feature of the soap opera genre, that failing such a requirement it may not be recognised as a soap opera, no matter whatever other generic conventions it may satisfy. In her early studies of the soap opera, Geraghty (1981: 9) even restricts the general definition of soap opera to this loose parameter as a long continuous television serial.

Apart from the logistics of presenting a long-running, continuous narrative in a serialised format, soap operas also tell their stories within certain narrative conventions. It is not merely a matter of making a collection of characters and events cohere in a story that can spread over numerous episodes. Soap operas follow sensationalistic narrative formats to keep the viewer’s interest from flagging and to tempt them to tune in on a regular basis to follow the story. The narrative conventions of melodrama or suspense followed by soap operas generate uncertainties and instabilities within stories of everyday life, which if depicted otherwise would not deliver such sensationalistic appeal (White 1994: 353).

Thus, on the most basic level, the definition that I began with earlier may seem to be adequate for understanding of the soap opera as a genre. However, identifying a certain description as the unquestionable definition of soap opera is perhaps misguided. While there may be a general agreement on the fundamental features of soap operas, we also need to appreciate the fluidity of the genre and the innumerable permutations and combinations possible within the wide field of soap operas. Even the most basic assumptions made about soap operas may vary from case to case, showing that the parameters governing this genre “are not fixed and immutable” (Bielby and Harrington 2005: 385). The key feature of soap opera as a long running serialised television narrative is made problematic when we consider that some soaps are short series with a few episodes, and in other instances “not all serials qualify as soap operas” (Cantor and Pingree 1983: 24). There are also wide divergences in the content of different soaps — ranging from comedy, tragedy, melodrama, female-oriented, youth-oriented — that also make it a heterogeneous genre. The longstanding status of soap opera in television programming and the plethora of soap series produced through the decades across the world add to its heterogeneity. As Cantor and Pingree note, as distinct from other dramatic programmes, each soap opera “may have a different history, a different mode of production, different (but overlapping) audiences and different content” (Cantor and Pingree 1983: 154). Given its status as an object of popular consumption, the susceptibility of the genre of soap opera to rapid change is also amplified by fluctuating trends of popular culture.

However, the heterogeneous nature of soap operas does not detract from its entity as a coherent body that constitutes a genre albeit one with a broad scope. All these differences and divergences amplify our understanding of the broad scope of the genre and alert us to be mindful of the different manifestations it may take. Martín-Barbero in his study of Latin soap opera flows writes, “it is true that the soap opera implies rigid stereotypes in its dramatic outline and strong conditioning elements in its visual grammar, as required and reinforced by the logic of market with increasingly transnational tendencies” (Martín-Barbero 1995: 282). As a cultural text that is so enmeshed with the mundane cultural repertoire of public domain — as what Hobson calls a “living form” — these many variances are bound to be part of the genre. For example, in an environment of rapid proliferation of communication technology and globalising economies, many locations have the production capacity to cater to local audiences. Non-Western countries have managed to construct new hybrid cultural texts that synthesise generic formats of texts taken from the West, with local ingredients. They seem to possess “the DNA, the recipe and the technology for invigorating local television industries” (Keane, Fung and Moran 2007: 10).

As a dominant television genre, soap opera is not only a popular form in itself; it has become the paradigmatic form of storytelling on television that has shaped a plethora of other genres. According to Wittebols ‘the soap opera, or more largely, serial storytelling, has emerged as the dominant guide by which stories are told on television, regardless of whether we are looking at news, prime time programming, or the presentation of sporting contest’ (Wittebols 2004: 2). Many scholars argue that the main objective of the soap opera and its form of storytelling is to attract mass audiences and sustain their interest, which has also made it a commoditised form of television commanding millions of viewers worldwide (Allen 1995; Hobson 2003).

In his study of the Australian version of popular reality TV *Big Brother*, Turner (2005: 420) claims that this television genre operates in a very similar way as soap opera in the way its structures stories and depictions of ordinary life on the television screen. Foster (2004: 284) notes that the popular reality TV show *Survivor* employs the concept of the cliff-hanger narrative borrowed from soap operas in order to create suspense for the audience every week.

## SOAP OPERA AS A WOMEN-ORIENTED GENRE

Another crucial feature of soap operas as television genre is its women-oriented nature. Soaps have always been identified as a female television genre. But as Kuhn (1984: 21) asks, “what precisely does it mean to say that certain representations are aimed at a female audience?” I will try to answer this question by illustrating the various points that support this contention about soaps as a women-oriented genre.

The bulk of content that is portrayed in soap operas—family issues, neighbourhood and romance—are societal issues that are of interest to women (Bowles 2002: 122). The feminine attributes associated with such matters depicted on these soaps can be explained as a gender norm acquired through cultural conditioning. In an early study on the famous British soap *Crossroads*, Charlotte Brunson counts “the culturally constructed skills of femininity—sensitivity, perception, intuition and the necessary privileging of the concerns of personal life” as attributes which are required to appreciate the content of the series (Brunson 1981: 36). Thus, soaps require the viewers to have “a set of knowledge and skills normally associated with them in patriarchal culture” (Mumford 1995: 45). It is through these feminine competencies acquired in everyday life in a patriarchal culture that Geraghty notes that women are able to decode “every word and gesture in order to understand its emotional meaning’ and derive pleasure, which maybe lost to male audiences who are not acculturated in such a manner” (Geraghty 1991: 43). Norms of gender in society are structured in such a way that issues associated with private lives of romance, interpersonal relationships, families are invariably deemed to be women’s issues. Fiske also defines soap operas as programmes based on “women’s matters, that is, as a domain where patriarchy grants women a position of some power” (Fiske 1987: 181–182).

Apart from the obvious thematic content of soaps, the narratives are told from a female-centric perspective. For example, a soap opera may tell the saga of a business family. However, the stories that are spun from this basic material are not about the corporate successes of the family members, but more about interpersonal relationships between the characters in glamorous settings of opulence and wealth. Soaps like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* set the story in the glamorous locale inhabited by families of business tycoons, but at its heart the story is about the relationships between the characters, mostly told from the perspective of the heroines.

Soap operas emulate the narratives of melodrama and romance that evolved with sentimental novels for women readers in the nineteenth century. According to Geraghty, melodrama on soaps is presented through “the close-ups of faces, of important objects, the deliberate movement of a character across a room, the lingering of the camera on a face at the end of a scene” (Geraghty 1991: 30). Ko also notes that Japanese soaps use such cinematographic techniques to heighten

the poignancy of a scene or underscore fluctuations of emotion (Ko 2004: 117). Melodrama and romance have become staples of popular culture aimed at women. As Gledhill (1992: 106) notes:

Since soap opera is known to have been devised to reach female audiences and to deploy subject matter designated “feminine”, namely family and personal relationships and a focus on emotion, it is assumed that such concerns are “melodramatic” and in a circular process that melodrama is somehow a “woman’s” cultural form.

In addition, there are ideological discourses embedded in the soap operas that revolve around the roles women inhabit in ordinary life. Tania Modleski notes that most soap operas have narrative structures that focus on the image of the “ideal mother”, where “soaps convince women that their highest goal is to see their families united and happy, while consoling them for their inability to bring about familial harmony” (Modleski 1979: 14). This in turn generates pleasure for women by creating identifiable role models for their own lives as mothers or potential mothers. Another point that also helps to support this contention of soap operas as a woman-oriented genre is the timeslot in which they tend to be scheduled. The afternoon slot in which most soap operas are broadcast is a time when the rest of the family is outside of the home, “when women form the bulk of the available audience” and thus “women are likely to be in the majority among soap watchers” (Bowles 2000: 122).

While these many points may support my contention that soap opera is a women-oriented genre, some scholars like Gauntlett and Hill (1999: 226) and Gledhill (1997: 367) have argued that the notion of gendered audience is no longer relevant because the viewership of soaps is quite broad and may include men and children too. Indeed, television audiences especially in non-Western settings form quite a heterogeneous viewership (Morley 1992; Penacchioni 1984). Distinct categories of popular culture catering to different demographic groups of age or sex are not so pronounced in non-Western settings as in the West. Soaps often form the bulk of collective television viewing for family members in non-Western settings. But while one may accept that soap operas are not only watched by women, this does not dilute the contention of the argument that the soap is a women-oriented genre. Its stories revolve around issues that are devised with a female audience in mind. The perspective that is privileged in the soaps is that of a female viewer, requiring competencies associated with women such that any viewer, no matter what their social identity, accommodates that perspective. In spite of the heterogeneity of the audience it can be rightfully claimed that “the image of soap opera as a “women’s genre’ persists to this day” (McCarthy 2001: 48).

## SOAP OPERA AS A SITE FOR ENGAGING WITH MODERNITY

Soap operas are a ubiquitous part of everyday life for audiences who imagine distant locales, form understandings of ordinary life and larger cultural trends through the stories and images propagated by the genre. Many previous soaps scholars associate these functions with the notion of modernity (Ang 1985; Chua 2004; Geraghty 1991;

Hobson 2003; Iwabuchi 2004). I endorse this view and argue here that as a vehicle for consumer culture, outlet for escapism and a platform of mediated reality, soaps generate a sense of modernity. These three aspects underpin my argument about soap opera genre as a potent site for engaging with modernity because they expand the viewers' imagination beyond the constraints of their personal lives, physical locales and cultural boundaries. Giddens writes, "modern organisations are able to connect the local and the global in ways which would have been unthinkable in more traditional societies and in so doing routinely affect the lives of many million of people" (Giddens 1990: 20). The following section will elaborate my argument about how these three aspects function to deterritorialise imagination and make soaps a paradigmatic site for women to engage with modernity.

### **Vehicle of Consumer Culture**

The association between soap operas and consumer goods runs deep; soaps are sponsored by manufacturers of retail consumer goods mostly targeted at housewives (Brown 1994; Cantor and Pingree 1983; Geraghty 1991; Hobson 2003; Spence 2005). In fact, the term soap opera was coined for these television programmes in their early years because they were produced by detergent manufacturers like Procter and Gamble, Colgate Palmolive and Lever Brothers (Allen 1985; Cantor and Pingree 1983). According to Waldrop and Crispell (1988: 29), soap operas were created to sell soaps to women through an ingenious use of entertainment, a strategy that created women audiences and attracted numbers not possible by direct advertising alone. Allen rightly describes it as a "narrative form, cultural product, advertising vehicle and source of aesthetic pleasure" (Allen 1985: 4). Thus, the origin of the genre shows soap opera as a source of entertainment enmeshed with consumer culture.

Some scholars have located the potential of the commercials to generate notions of everyday life for the audiences. By the constant bombardment of messages about consumer goods purporting to support shared common interests of women, advertisements create storylines about the needs of everyday life and imbricate themselves in the imagination of everyday life for women. Portraying the challenges of everyday life of maintaining households, commercials "forge an imagined solidarity among women" (Spence 2005: 143).

While consumer culture is entrenched in the origin of the genre, the early association of consumerism with soap operas was limited to direct advertising. It was not until the 1980s when American soaps such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* became a global phenomenon that consumer culture began to be imbricated in the narrative of the soap operas themselves. According to Ang (1985: 2), *Dallas* symbolises a new modern age of television history underscored by the promotion of an American lifestyle that revolved around consumer culture. Geraghty (1991: 121) notes that while opulence is often depicted on American soaps, this is now filtered through the lens of consumer culture. Enjoying luxury is now not depicted as an inaccessible lifestyle reserved for the privileged few. Luxury is now shown as an aspirational ideal accessible to any viewer who can muster the economic power to indulge in the consumer culture freely available in the market. The American soap *Dynasty* created an aspirational standard for consumer culture through spectacular images of foreign locations, glamorous settings (Geraghty 1991: 127). The notions of individual choice,

upward mobility and unhindered interaction with the outside world promoted by consumer culture in soaps foster a sense of modernity for audiences.

Apart from being laced with images of conspicuous consumption, the ability of soaps to forge more mundane cultural trends that could be easily replicated and followed by mass audiences, is a major factor through which soap operas act as a vehicle for consumer culture. As Hobson notes with regard to the Australian soaps *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*, which are also popular in Britain and New Zealand, “the youth culture which features in some of the Australian soap operas...gave rise to a fashion that reflected the surfing clothes... becoming a major fashion item for young men” (Hobson 2003: 68). Other lifestyle changes such as consumption of “fruit, vegetables, fish and brown bread” and going abroad for beach tourism were also after-effects of trends cultivated in those soaps (Matleski 1999: 26).

Just like these soap operas in the Western world, their non-Western counterparts are also deeply enmeshed with consumer culture (Iwabuchi 2008: 245). In the Latin American countries, a version of romance dramas called *telenovelas* also began in the 1960s under the sponsorship of detergent manufacturers like Lever Brothers and Colgate Palmolive and now continues to be a vehicle for sponsorships of a plethora of consumer products. A parallel development in the *telenovelas* from commercial breaks to narrative emphasis on consumer culture in the program has also taken place. Product placement within the soaps is quite a popular trend in *telenovelas* where consumer goods are portrayed as complementing the modern lifestyles of its characters (Mattelart 1990: 47). The main attraction of a genre called *trendy drama* in Japan (urban lifestyle and fashion-based drama targeted at youth audiences) is the conspicuous consumption of lifestyle products creating ideals of fashion and glamour for its viewers. These *trendy dramas* with their consumerist focus “truly forge a new life style for women in modern days with a Japanese situation, representing urban life and consumption (sic)” (Matsuda and Higashi 2006: 19). These *trendy dramas* are also immensely popular in other parts of Asia where audiences seek to emulate the fashionable images of the Japanese characters. For example, Ko reports: “Japanese idol dramas have emerged as an important phenomenon in Taiwan ... [and have] impacted the local life style, formation of the youth subculture, consumption patterns, colloquial speech, and even urban planning” (Ko 2004: 109).

Another element that aids the promotion of consumer culture in soap operas is the urban settings in which these soaps are invariably based. In fact, an urban lifestyle seems to be indispensable for depictions of a modern lifestyle fuelled by consumerism. As Leung notes, urban lifestyle is depicted as the key to modernity with its “appeal of novelty” where “the city is portrayed as full of possibilities, where the countryside is seen as backward, sleepy, and only for failures” (Leung 2002: 71). Iwabuchi says that urban lifestyle provides an indispensable visual structure to the series of *trendy dramas*, where the cityscape of Tokyo is depicted as the playground where all consumerist desires are fulfilled and pleasures of a modern life are achieved (Iwabuchi 2004: 2). Explaining the popularity of this same genre in audiences outside Japan in Taiwan, Ko (2004: 123) says that it is this image of Tokyo, as the most progressive and vibrant city in Asia which is idealised by its Taiwanese viewers as the epitome of modernity. Thus it appears that the “city” has been identified as a space to engage with modernity, where “city is a space in which modernism happens” (Lash 1990: 31).

This association of soap opera with consumer culture through the many means illustrated above—direct advertising, narrative focus on consumer culture, product placement within the program, urban lifestyle and modern cityscape—make it a site for women to engage with modernity. Soaps often show the transformative capacity of consumer culture to change a subject to tell a broader narrative of progress from tradition to modernity. Modernity is depicted as an ideal that can be acquired by indulging in consumption of goods freely available in the marketplace. Especially for Malay women, non-Western soaps offer a window onto an outside world of consumer culture and a possibility of envisioning their personal journey of becoming a modern individual who can participate in that world.

### **Platform for Escapism**

Many previous scholars note that the crucial reason for the popularity of the soap opera as a television genre amongst women audiences, particularly housewives, is due to the sense of escape that it provides its viewers. “Escapism” is a key element of the pleasure of viewing soaps and soaps give viewers an outlet for escapism to free themselves temporarily from any burden they may have in the real world and “becomes a site for liberation through desire” (Lewis 2002: 287). Ang says, “producing and consuming fantasies allows for a play with reality, which can be felt as ‘liberating’ because it is fictional, not real” (Ang 1985: 49). Spence adds that women enjoy this escapism as part of the pleasure of watching soaps as “a break, a fantasy, imaginary solution, some excitement, relaxation, or ‘a moment for themselves’” (Spence 2005: 29). However, unlike older traditional cultural forms such as stage plays, theatre, and to some extent romance fiction, which also offer a sense of escapism, soap operas function in a modern way.

On the most basic level, soap operas are simply entertainment. The fundamental purpose of the soap is to entertain its audience and to divert them from the worries of their actual lives and take their imagination into another dimension for a short time. As Dyer says:

Entertainment offers the image of ‘something better’ to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide. Alternatives, hope, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized (Dyer 1992: 18).

In a striking example of the lure of soaps drawing audiences from the struggles of everyday life, de Melo illustrates how housewives in the Latin Americas who may have pressing issues of daily survival, also tune into watch *telenovelas* on a regular basis to relieve themselves of stress (cited in Oliveira 1993: 121).

With their typical themes, soaps produced in one location can be watched by audiences elsewhere, without requiring much cultural proficiency, except for minute adjustments. As carriers of cultural content from one place to another, soaps become vehicles for introducing cultural trends and lifestyles to local audiences from foreign regions. For example, *Dallas* propagated aspirations for a middle class American lifestyle for non-Western viewers in the 1980s even if they had never visited America. Recently, soaps from other regions like Japan, Korea and Latin America have provided new images of urban middle class lifestyle in Asia. Lin and

Tong reports, “the representations of cosmopolitan city life, individual pursuits of free love, social justice and modern consumerist desire can go beyond national boundaries, attracting viewers in many part of Asia and creating a shared desire among them” (Lin and Tong 2008: 102). Women may also become familiar with issues that might be foreign within their cultural context. One’s sense of habitat is not constricted by immediate physical location but latches on to the imaginative spaces of the soap opera. For example, Lin and Tong claim that soap audiences in Asia “enjoy the fantasy elements as both possible and plausible since the story happens in a different city in Asia and thus offers some room for imagination or fantasy” (Lin and Tong 2008: 94). Particularly in some rapidly developing Asian countries like Malaysia, women are still restricted to the domestic domain despite the liberalisation of economic and social structure, and media like soap operas become an outlet for engagement with the wider world for these women. These women’s view of modernity is shaped vicariously through the images in soap operas that have assumed a ubiquitous place in everyday life.

The formal elements and structure of soaps is derived from a long tradition of sentimental literature for woman. The genre thrives on extravagance and sensationalism. The narratives may involve illogical resolutions to the stories: a dead person returning, a conflict resolved, an identical twin. Ang makes an insightful note about the melodramatic family narrative where the concept of family “is not actually romanticised in soap operas; on the contrary, the imaginary ideal of the family as safe haven in a heartless world is constantly shattered” (Ang 1985: 69). This view has been further elaborated by Spence who adds that “family life is more emblematic of splitting, separation, and struggle than of a narcissistic merging or an imaginary unity of parents and children” (Spence 2005: 99). The sensationalism draws them to enjoy the drama and immerse themselves in this alternate reality because it “has the ability to provoke strong emotions in audiences, from tears of sorrow and identification, to derisive laughter” (Mercer and Shingler 2004: 1). And the visual aspects of the melodramatic presentation of soap narrative further heighten its entrancing quality.

The theme of romance that forms the core of many of these soaps is another recognisable trope in cultural products that have often been identified as escapist entertainment for women audiences. In her study of romance novels and women readers, Janice Radway (1984: 93) notes that reading romance texts in the age before electronic media also constituted a source of escapism, where the readers could access a sense of liberation from their mundane lives. This pattern has continued with soap operas, which typically have a romance narrative at the core. Further, soap operas reach audiences at a scale beyond the scope of romance texts of the literary form that require literacy and significant leisure time.

Another generic element of soap operas is the portrayal of a resilient heroine overcoming many tribulations. This also adds to the value of soap as escapist entertainment. In a world where most societies are structured on a patriarchal system, soaps provide spectacular stories of women meeting challenges in a hostile work place or mounting triumphs of a domestic kind. This capacity of soaps as an outlet for escapism is especially relevant to female audiences in countries like Malaysia, where women may construe images of modernity as an imaginary space of female triumph. For example, Iwabuchi (2002: 144) has noted that audiences in

Taiwan, who follow the Japanese soap *Tokyo Love Story* ranked it as a favourite for its portrayal of strong, independent women.

### **Channel for Mediated Reality**

While this sense of escapism is an important aspect of soaps, soap operas do not merely paint a fantastical other worldly realm that dissolves all incumbent realities of the viewer's world. Soap opera is not a fantasy genre. As a genre, soaps are firmly embedded in the tradition of natural realism purporting to portray the lives of everyday people. The aesthetic ideology of soaps as portrayals of everyday life reality insinuates itself into the perceptions of the audiences as truthful representations of reality. According to Wittebols, soap operas reflect the realities of everyday life and this element gives the audience 'a sense of immediacy' (Wittebols 2004: 3). The narrative style of this television genre allows the audience, particularly women, to have a greater understanding of everyday life issues.

Depicting themes of everyday lives, soap operas act as a channel for constituting a mediated reality for its audiences. In soaps, realistic portrayals of ordinary lives are crucial to their narrative structure. Ang identifies the pleasure of recognition, of issues or character types, as the major attraction of *Dallas* for its audiences. As she writes, "being able to imagine the characters as 'real people' ... is an anchor for the pleasure of *Dallas*" (Ang 1985: 20). In this scheme, Livingstone (1988: 67) notes that British soaps are portrayed as being even more 'mundane and down to earth' in contrast to American soaps like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* which offer aspirational images of glamour and opulence. Thus the narrative of soaps construct pictures of ordinariness that is then broadcast back to audiences to amplify their sense of reality with those mediated images of ordinariness.

While the portrayals of quotidian issues of everyday life may make audiences accept soaps as representations approximating their ordinary lives, soaps actually follow sensationalistic plotlines that go against realism. For example, while family is the central theme for many of the soap operas, these are presented in a melodramatic fashion with "emotional entanglements with home as the stable centre" (Geraghty 1991: 60). These melodramatic narratives may not occur in actual lives, but the melodramatic lens of these soap narratives may begin to colour the imagination of the viewers. Women may empathise with certain characters and take to heart the message "to strive on with the eventual hope of attaining their goals, or personal growth and happiness" (Leung 2004: 100). As Ang notes, stories like the triumph of a long-suffering heroine, create pleasure for the viewers to construct imaginary resolutions for everyday reality (Ang 1985: 122). Thus, taking the narratives of soap operas as stories of everyday life they may however begin to look at their lives through that lens, further contributing to creation of mediated reality for the viewer.

Opening up a space for such issues, soap operas take on the role of a mediatory tool that can influence and inform notions of everyday life for women audiences. As Hobson points out "its stories must be the stories of the audience and it's predominate emotion must be that of recognition... of the characters and... stories they tell" (Hobson 2003: 172). Hobson, however, is partly right because some studies in Asian countries show that along with recognising or identifying some elements, viewers also tend to distance themselves from some other elements in the soap operas (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). Audiences are confronted with the moral

dilemma of accepting the “same” or going along with “different” as portrayed in the soap. For example, identification with a strong female character in a soap opera may inspire a woman to be more assertive in her life. On the other hand, dis-identification could provoke her to condemn such behaviour as improper and unfeminine. It is the playful interpretation of the stories of everyday reality that allows women to form such judgments in their own lives that forms the pleasure of watching soaps. This may enable them to question, reflect and form opinions about their life against the images and stories from the soaps. In his research on Hong Kong soaps in Guangzhou, China, Fung suggests that middle class audiences exercised such a critical attitude in making judgments about the depiction of everyday life in those soaps. He notes:

... the audience believes they have the ability to grasp, re-configure and finally depict a realistic picture of Hong Kong through reading the border-crossing television. While fantasizing about the materialistic superiority of the capitalist society of Hong Kong, ironically, the audience are aware of the fact that uncritically embracing the materialistic way of life in Hong Kong is unrealistic for them, not because they cannot fantasize about the unrealistic way of life in Hong Kong, but because they are incapable of actualising this consumption in their own context (Fung 2008: 90).

What I want to suggest here is that women are no longer dependent on direct physical observation or experience anymore to learn about the complexities of family life. Watching daytime soaps has become part of everyday culture for a large number of women in the world. Apart from extraordinary stories of romance, the important focus in soap opera is family life. The portrayal of issues of ordinary family life in soap operas allows women to understand and engage with the complexities of their own lives. Soap operas encourage women to interpret their own experience in relation to the ideas presented in these programmes. Simple narrative elements and interesting storytelling characters are employed to connect with a universal audience, but also allow them to share contemporary social issues regardless of their differing cultural locations. Television viewing is an essential part of modern life and reaches across different strata of population crossing over barriers of literacy or class.

In his studies of the role of television in everyday life, Silverstone claims that “television is a domestic medium ... it is part of our domestic culture ... providing in its programming and its schedules models and structures of domestic life, or at least of certain versions of domestic life” (Silverstone 1994: 24). Soap opera is a pervasive feature of everyday culture and a node for consumption of popular culture for women whose lives revolve around the private space of the household. Soap operas on television allow women to engage and associate their own lives with alternative lifestyles and also to engage with contemporary social issues drawn from the complexities of family conflict, love and relationships.

Another aspect of soaps as stories of everyday life that contributes to making it a source of mediated reality is that they often choose topical issues circulating within a society. For example, the British soaps *EastEnders* introduced issues of homosexuality in the 1980s when gay people, AIDS and same sex marriages were

becoming an issue in popular discourse (Geraghty 1991; Hobson 2003). Other media like newspapers may overtly construct notions of reality and happenings in the world, soap operas also do so in their own way. These soap operas also provide repertoires of images and social discourses that influence popular perception of larger social issues. Soaps help amplify the viewer's sense of inhabiting a world beyond the immediate vicinity of one's surroundings, who must cope with the larger issues of a society and develop opinions about them. The issues articulated in soap operas endeavour to be current and contemporary, making the audiences feel connected with the larger society they inhabit. As Hobson notes, soaps "running contemporaneously with the experience of the audience" whether it is to mark some holidays, change in season, trickle into the mediated reality by virtue of their contemporaneity with the social lives of the audiences at large (Hobson 2003: 34). And the long running, continuous storyline of soaps to which the audiences tune in on a regular basis, further amplifies this sense of being connected to a world outside their own personal lives. Circumscribed within the boundaries of her domestic life, a woman may not have direct experience of many societal issues, but soaps provide an outlet for her to engage with wider society. As Hobson notes, "they can share in understanding it in greater depth by experiencing the representation in televisual form" (Hobson 2003: 142).

By portraying issues of interest to women in their actual lives soaps also become the means through which these women mediate understanding of their own lives. The viewers not only become involved in the dramatic problems faced by the characters but begin to vicariously filter their actual lives through those narratives. With its capacity to draw audiences into the imagined world of the soap, the story also percolates into the lives of its audiences. They begin to look at their everyday lives through the lens of the narratives of the soap operas. Thus, soaps are a textual intervention in the domain of the imagination, a channel for mediated reality.

## CONCLUSION

Non-Western soaps have emerged as a potent site to engage with modernity in contemporary Malaysia. As a vehicle of consumer culture, a platform for escapism and a channel for mediated reality, soaps are now a dominant site for women to derive ideas of modernity in the now realised dream of the Malay state for a Malay middle class and capitalist development of the economy. Within this scenario, women have a particular affinity with soap operas and this genre of popular culture has shaped women's notions of their roles and ideas of modern life.

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