

Representation of Malay people in film - A study on film by P. Ramlee, *Bujang Lapok*

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Abstract

In studying history, film can be the “best” source as it is/was produced in an era. The world that the standard or mainstream film constructs is so familiar that we rarely think about how it is put together. That, of course, is the point. Films want to make us think they are reality. Yet the reality we see on the screen is neither inevitable nor somehow natural to the camera, but a vision creatively constructed out of bits and pieces of images taken from the surface of a world. Therefore, this paper discussed on the portrayals of Malay people in film. Film by P. Ramlee, a renowned film director and actor, *Bujang Lapok* was chosen in this study. Film is still not really accepted by Malaysian as a source of history but given a status of P. Ramlee as greatest artiste ever born in this country, it is worthwhile to do research on P. Ramlee’s films and its relation to social history of Malaysia especially Malay people.

Keywords: Malay, history, film.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

P. Ramlee or his real name “Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Puteh” has been regarded as “greatest artiste” Malaysia ever seen. What makes him regarded as a legend is his versatility and also his output especially films and songs. He is a singer and composer, he can play music instruments not one but more than one, he is an actor and he is a film director. But most Malaysians whether that live during P. Ramlee’s time between late 1940s until his death on 29th May 1973, remember his films and songs. P. Ramlee was born on 22nd March 1929 to an Acehnese, Teuku Nyak Puteh Teuku Karim and P. Ramlee’s mother was a Pulau Pinang local, Che Mah Hussein. According to Harding and Ahmad Sarji (2011), it is unsure as to what Teuku Nyak Putek did for a living but many variously described him as a navigator and a foreman while Che Mah was a widow with one son. When he enrolled to school, his father changed the registered name to “Ramlee bin Puteh” and dropped the “Teuku” element as it was thought that “Teuku Zakaria” was unsuitable for the boy. “Puteh” not only part of “Teuku Nyak Puteh” but his father was also popularly known as “Puteh Deat”. His father came from an aristocratic family of Oleebalang in East Aceh (Ibid).

P. Ramlee’s talent in music and films started to shine even during Japanese occupation 1940s. He was very good and commanding in Japanese language as during that time, Malaysians were “forced” to study Japanese language and also had to salute Japanese flag during assembly. P. Ramlee usually helped his friends to understand Japanese language and at the same time the Japanese were very much enjoyed to listen him singing and led Hirake San, one of Japanese officer gave him music lessons (Ibid). This also made P. Ramlee liked and understood Japanese popular music very well. At the age of thirteen, P. Ramlee was able to play ukulele and could play several popular song by himself and this led him to take a regular

lessons with music teacher, Kamarudin bin Idris. This was when P. Ramlee started to learn on music notes and also learned how to play instruments like guitar and violin. According to Harding and Ahmad Sarji (2011), Kamarudin found that P. Ramlee was a ready pupil, quick to learn and easy to teach. During his early teens, P. Ramlee could master other instruments like piano and saxophone followed trumpet, accordion and xylophone. Harding and Ahmad Sarji added that P. Ramlee was a child prodigy able to perform on most of the in an orchestra and it is “impossible” to explain or to analyse P. Ramlee’s musical gift. It was inevitable that, P. Ramlee had composed and wrote the lyric of a song called “Azizah”. The lyric celebrates the beauty and the sweet smile of Azizah in verse which is simple, direct and moving (Ibid, pp 12). Until now there are debates on who actually was “Azizah”. Many regarded “Azizah” as the first girl P. Ramlee fell in love with while some said, “Azizah” was a daughter to a rich man in Pulau Pinang but their love was forbidden. The character “Azizah” was later took into screen by P. Ramlee himself in “PenarekBecha”, the first film he directed. phrase of “based on true events” or the title of the film itself must be directly showing the name of the real events or the real figure such “Leftenan Adnan” etc. This kind of situation may lead to another question whether films are depiction of the past or just a materials of entertainment that only a fiction in nature but produced in the past. According to Wan Aida (2015), the questions or issues of whether films are produced to depict any historical events or individuals much depend on the perspective of the director. Not all aspects of any particular event can be depicted and transfer it to silver screen but at the same time, those events could be the inspiration to the director to present it in his or her film. Prater (1998) made interesting remarks on films where he stated that “movies have always been about diverting people from reality”.

In 1945, P. Ramlee started with a band called Teruna Sekampung. One of his activities with these so-called “lads from the village” was that of a song arranger and in this way he quickly gained wide experience and knowledge of all the popular music then to be heard. They were four of them including P. Ramlee where their photo can be seen displayed in P. Ramlee memorial in Kuala Lumpur and Pulau Pinang and also widely published in books related to P. Ramlee. They performed at several restaurants in Pulau Pinang. They soon became “popular” and had performed in other states such as Perlis, Kedah and Perak to the extent of which they also broadcasted though Radio Malaya. The success of “Azizah” encouraged P. Ramlee to compose more songs which he sang himself. In 1948, he entered a competition organized by Radio Malaya and he emerged as champion singer. Later on he formed a music band called Pancharagam Mustika. They were invited to sing in an agricultural show at Bukit Mertajam. Among the audience was B.S Rajhans and where Rajhans felt that something special about P. Ramlee and invited him to join the Malay Film Production Ltd in Singapore (Ibid page 14). At first, P. Ramlee reluctant to accept Rajhans’ offer but after a few persuasion by Rajhans, P. Ramlee finally decided to pack and moved to Singapore to start his “greatest” journey in film.

One of many studies on Malay include article of Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, “Films as Social History – P. Ramlee’s “SenimanBujangLapok” and Malays in Singapore (1950s-1960s), 2005 best described the “feelings” and critics of P. Ramlee towards Malay. According to Syed Muhd, many of P. Ramlee’s biographers were in consensus that his works were, and produced in many ways and aspects were his products of life experiences. Although P. Ramlee’s ancestors were from Aceh, he was born in Penang on 22 March 1929 to a labourer and the only son through his mother’s second marriage. He grew up at a time when Malaya was undergoing the stresses of the Great Depression and in his early years had painful

memories (Syed Muhd, 2005). Just like any other Penangites, P. Ramlee grew up learning the rudimentary aspects of Islam. However, P. Ramlee was critical to “traditional interpretations” of Islamics, thus he directed *Semerah Padi* in 1956 which was highly regarded by scholars as “the first Malay film” that portrayed almost “complete” definition of Malay society and Islam in Malaya. According to Hassan Muthalib (2007), P. Ramlee had produced what he regarded as realist commentary on Malay society and modernity especially based on four films he directed, *Penarek Becha* (195), *Semerah Padi* (1956), *Pancha Delima* (1957) and *Bujang Lapok* (1957). *Penarek Becha* (The Trishaw Peddler) which according to Syed Muhd (2005) intended to show messages of class divisions and poverty within the Malay society during his time. In *Pancha Delima*, however, according to Hassan Muthalib, P. Ramlee had lost his way as the Malay world almost totally absent and giving way to one that was intrinsically Hindu. Among P. Ramlee’s best works are *Bujang Lapok* (Three Raggedy Bachelors) and three other “BujangLapok’s franchise” namely, *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok* and *Pendekar Bujang Lapok*. As for *Bujang Lapok*, according to Barnard (2006), P. Ramlee saw modernity as causing Malays “to be manipulative, untrustworthy and insensitive towards traditional culture”. For example, Barnard added that representation of the village lifestyle, as if it is authentic, was an imitation of the colonial construction. *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, according to Syed Muhd (2005) was filmed at a time, which coincided with the reawakening of the Malays, particularly the literary elites (this was where P. Ramlee involved in ASAS 50). A major event that induced Malays in Singapore into full-blown activism in the post-war years was the Malayan Union Scheme which was announced in October 1945 and events after that were indeed became important that shaped Malaya.

One of P. Ramlee’s central concerns as reflected in the films produced in Singapore was the complexities of having to maintain traditional Malay values whilst at the same time, keeping up with the coming of modernity. P. Ramlee believed in a symbiotic relationship of both elements in the daily lives of Malays during his time (Syed Muhd, 2005). He also believed that Malays were essentially good and called for change but was not directed to the power-that-be but to the Malays themselves (Hassan Muthalib, 2007). According to Uhde (2005), the contribution of P. Ramlee to Malay culture is a well-known fact today. An important element in P. Ramlee’s film style was realism (Syed Muhd, 2005, Barnard 2006 & Uhde 2005). Barnard (2006), stated that P. Ramlee is seen as an epic hero of prodigious talent who charismatically raised Malay cinema from simply being entertainment to a commentary on Malay society and modernity.

2.0 “ORANG MELAYU”

In general, definition of “Malay people” or “orang Melayu” described by Federal Constitution of Malaysia in Article 160 as someone born to a Malaysian citizen who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs and is domiciled in Malaysia, Singapore or Brunei. That is the “nearest” or best definition of “orang Melayu” although at the same time, there are several other definitions depends on what context it is referred to. Meanwhile, according to Baker (2006), Malay people has inhabited the Malay archipelago for at least 2500 years and “originally” the Malays were a mixture of the indigenous people of the archipelago and also known as Malayo-Polynesians and can be seen as far west as Madagascar, off the coast of Africa, as far east as the South Pacific and as far north as Taiwan. Later on, especially in the seventh and eighth centuries, the population grew and influenced by a significant migration from Sumatra and brought with them settled agricultural pursuits, such as wet rice

farming and their village cultures (Ibid). After that, saw further migration in the form of Muslim Indians, Arabs and Persians where those migration came along with many different factors, mainly economic and religious expansion. Between the 15th and 18th century there was continued migration from across the Melaka Straits. The Minangkabaus from central Sumatra settled in the areas now known as Negeri Sembilan and Melaka, and some later moved across the peninsula to Pahang. The other sub-ethnic group, Bugis also migrated from the eastern archipelago as a result of Dutch interference in their traditional trading patterns. The Bugis took up residence in Johor, Selangor and Pahang. Two other groups from the Malay cultural area also left their imprint on Malaysia in this area, albeit on a much more limited scale. Baker added, the so-called “inter-archipelago” migration continued into the twentieth century. Malaysia at one time was under-populated, and there were large areas of underdeveloped land to settle. British rule offered relative peace, security and economic well-being. This was especially seen in the significant numbers of Javanese who immigrated to the peninsula.

These explanations may be best describing “who are the Malays” based on geography and its location although there several other explanations the origins and roots of Malay people would be. However, according to Md Salleh Yapar (2005), the term “Melayu” is more complex and elusive than what it is understood. One of the prominent researcher in studying the history of Malaysia and Indonesia, Anthony Reid concluded and then quoted by Md Salleh, “Melayu” and “Malayness” has evolved from ancient times and their understanding have been appropriated not only at the “center” of Straits of Melaka, but also at the “peripheries” of Malay world (2005). The “peripheries” here could be well more understood with statement by Roff (1974) where he stated “a Malay is a man whose male parent is a native of this Malay Peninsula or of any of the neighbouring island of the Malay Archipelago”. According to Syed Husin Ali (2008) the arrival of colonialism introduced new political boundaries which divided the peoples of the Malay stock into new nation-states. Portugal was the first western power to set foot in this area, but by the mid-seventeenth century the Portuguese were ousted by the Dutch and the English. It was colonialism which separated the people of the Malay stock into groups confined within the boundaries of their news states. Prior to that, Syed Husin stated that, the term “Malay” (Melayu) has many meanings depend on contexts. The definition of Malay becomes more complex in the context of two other issues, namely its legal definition and the newly coined term Bumiputra (son of soil). Apart from constitutional definition of “Melayu” researcher would say there is no concrete and definite definition. Perhaps the best short description and yet “complete” of the “Melayu” can be seen from poem by National Laureate, the late Usman Awang. Although the meaning or description of “Melayu” presented in a poem, it could be considered as the most complete description since it described a lot of traits of Malay people. For example in one of the verses, it mentioned the origins of Malay people or its ancestors. It is written:

Melayu di tanah Semenanjung luas maknanya
(There are many meanings of Malay in Peninsula)
Jawa itu Melayu, (The Java people considered Malay)
Bugis itu Melayu, (The Bugis people considered Malay)
Banjar juga disebut Melayu,
(Even the Banjar are considered Malay)
Minangkabau memang Melayu,
(Minangkabau definitely a Malay)

Keturunan Acheh adalah Melayu, (Achehnese people is Malay)

Jakun dan Sakai asli Melayu,

(The Jakun and Sakai are original Malay)

Arab dan Pakistani, semua Melayu,

(Arabs and Pakistanis are all Malay)

Mamak dan Malbari serap ke Melayu,

(Mamak and Malbari inducted into Malay)

Malah muallaf bertakrif Melayu

(even the convert defined as Malay)

3.0 “MELAYU” IN P. RAMLEE’S FILMS

According to Hassan Muthalib (2007), P. Ramlee had produced what he regarded as realist commentary on Malay society and modernity especially based on four films he directed, *Penarek Becha* (195), *Semerah Padi* (1956), *Pancha Delima* (1957) and *Bujang Lapok* (1957). *Penarek Becha* (The Trishaw Peddler) which according to Syed Muhd (2005) intended to show messages of class divisions and poverty within the Malay society during his time. In *Pancha Delima*, however, according to Hassan Muthalib, P. Ramlee had lost his way as the Malay world almost totally absent and giving way to one that was intrinsically Hindu. Among P. Ramlee’s best works are *Bujang Lapok* (Three Raggedy Bachelors) and three other “*BujangLapok’s* franchise” namely, *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok* and *Pendekar Bujang Lapok*. As for *Bujang Lapok*, according to Barnard (2006), P. Ramlee saw modernity as causing Malays “to be manipulative, untrustworthy and insensitive towards traditional culture”. For example, Barnard added that representation of the village lifestyle, as if it is authentic, was an imitation of the colonial construction. *Seniman Bujang Lapok*, according to Syed Muhd (2005) was filmed at a time, which coincided with the reawakening of the Malays, particularly the literary elites (this was where P. Ramlee involved in ASAS 50). A major event that induced Malays in Singapore into full-blown activism in the post-war years was the Malayan Union Scheme which was announced in October 1945 and events after that were indeed became important that shaped Malaya.

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Poverty is one of the issues long being associated with Malay people and also one of sub theme found in many of P. Ramlee’s films. Many signs in P. Ramlee’s films can be found to be directly related to poverty. One of the clear example is “struggle of the poor”. In *Bujang Lapok*, signs of poverty can be found where some scene directly meant to show the struggle of the poor and their economic status. One

of it when Ramlee dating girls and they had their appointment at one of the restaurant. One of the girls Ramlee dated, sneakily “stole” a few foods and brought it to her home. Ramlee followed her to her house and later on he found that the girl lived in poor area and gave money that she stole to her mother but her mother declined to accept the money as she knew that the money earned through unlawful way. The girl whose name is Prani said to her mother, that is the only way to live in this world, whether “to lie or being fooled by others”.

Girl (Prani) : *Nah, mak.* (Here you are, mother)

Mother : *Mak tak mau.* (I don't want it!)

Girl : *Kenapa mak?* (Why mother?)

Mother : *Sudahlah, Prani. Kau janganlah menipu lagi.* (Stop it, Prani! Don't you cheat anymore.)

Girl : *Mak, dalam dunia ni kalau kita baik hati, kita jujur, tak mau cakap banyak, kita akan dipijak, mak. Tetapi kalau kita bohong, menipu, meninggikan diri, orang pandang mulia pada kita mak. Sekarang, mak pilih, satu antara dua, mak suka Prani beginikah atau suka Prani menjualkan kehormatan Prani kah?*

(Mother, in this world, if we are so kind, honest and don't talk much, people will look down on us. But if we cheat, lie and pretend like an elite, people will respect us. Now, you choose whether you want me like this or sell my dignity?)

Mother : *Dua-dua mak tak suka.* (I don't favour both)

Ramlee : *Inilah sandiwara dunia.* (And this is drama)

The message through this film quite “clear” to show certain people could even break the law just to satisfy their needs or at least to fulfill their basic needs. The act is against the teaching of Islam or any religions in this world but being a Muslim that resides in the so-called Islamic country of Malaysia, the act of stealing is unforgiven.

Syed Khairuddin (2005) also touched on the issue of poverty among Malay in P. Ramlee's films especially in Bujang Lapok trilogy (Bujang Lapok, Seniman Bujang Lapok and Alibaba Bujang Lapok). According to Syed Khairuddin, Malays were portrayed as economically depressed and marginal community who deprived basic essentials of life such as food, health and lodging. He added that the Bujang Lapok trilogy are the representations of Malay poverty. It could be said that those three films, we can see the poverty theme or message portrayed. In Bujang Lapok, the three main characters, Ramlee, Ajis and Sudin lived in a “long house” or *rumah panjang* where they lived under same roof with other tenants. There was a scene where their neighbor, husband and wife with four kids quarrel because the husband still owed money with loan shark to make sure their wedding went through.

Wife: *Ceraikan aku, ceraikan aku. Kau tak guna jadi jantan. Jantan tak malu. Haa, kau kau.* (I want a divorce! You are useless man. No shame at all)

Husband: *Apa yang kau merepek bukan-bukan ni. Apa kurang yang aku kasi sama kau.* (What are you talking about? What did I didn't give you?)

Wife: *Ya, memang kurang. Asal aku mintak, kau marah. Asal aku mintak, kau marah. Cuba kau tengok orang sebelah tu. Nahh, gelangnya. Aku semayam emas pun tak pernah kau belikan.* (Yes. When I asked

for something, you become mad. Look at our neighbor, there are the ring. For me? Not even a gram of gold you buy.

Husband: *Siapa yang bersalah dalam hal ini? Siapa yang bersalah?! Ini semua mak bapak kau yang punya salah. Waktu aku kahwin dulu dengan engkau, mak bapak kau mintak wang sampai lima ribu. Aku tidak ada wang. Aku pinjam benggali. Sekarang sudah sampai ada tiga anak, hutang benggali pun belum habis dibayar. Ko tau, bunga makin naik. Mak bapak kau yang salah.*

(Who should be blamed for this matter? Who? All these faults were your parents' fault. When I married you, your parents asked for five thousand (ringgit). I didn't have money. I borrowed from a loan shark. Now, with three kids but that loan still not fully paid and the interest keep on rising. These are your parents' fault.)

In the same film, there was a father "sell" his daughter to the person he borrowed money just to make sure his debt settled. Perhaps the scene where Ramlee was in fighting with the father, Ramlee went on to say:

Ramlee : *Pakcik bukannya manusia tapi pakcik adalah syaitan yang bertopengkan manusia. Pakcik sanggup mempertaruhkan anak untuk bermain judi ya! Tahu tak perbuatan pakcik itu membiakkan persundalan di sisi masyarakat? Pakcik sanggup memukul Ajis ya? Pakcik sanggup memukul Ajis. Jikalau tidak ada Ajis, anak pakcik akan mati di dalam sungai dan pakcik akan dituduh menjadi pembunuh tau!?* (You are not human but you are evil in a human mask! How dare you sell your daughter just to gamble?

Do you know that your action just breeding prostitution among society?

And how dare you beating Ajis? If not because of Ajis, your daughter might die in that river and you will be charged of murder.)

This clearly shows that poverty is a main issue among Malay society and for one to escape from it, not really easy and even one needed to go against norms and even religion for living. Poverty also can "open" to other possibilities in lives. The Qur'an has a verse specifically referring to poverty and the consequences of it if the people cannot cope with the challenges.

4.0 CONCLUSION

As conclusion, the research and study on historical film and its historical "facts" maybe a "new" field of study in Malaysia particularly film study. P. Ramlee's films were most produced and directed during the times that considered as "golden years" of Malaysian cinema. Coincide with that are a few historical events occurred in Malaysia. His films are rich of historical "facts" that can be discovered. However this study also is facing with the debate from the so-called historian "by training" that films just another fiction and it may not contain historical evidence in it but at the same time, there are people believe that any films regardless of the era it was produced bring historical "facts" that can be referred by the future generation and as one way of studying history. P. Ramlee through his films had produced descriptions on the "Melayu" or Malay people. Although some may poise question on does it so important to know the "real" identity of Malay people, perhaps it is important because everyone in this country should know the root and origins of its people, including Malay. Since there are only a few scholars and even academic discourse on the identity of Malay people, maybe P. Ramlee had left his legacy of describing the "Melayu" as

typically discussed among society and P. Ramlee had used his expertise in film to portray that and it is not only an act of “expert” but only “genius” can produce such masterpiece.

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