Binary Inversions and Gender Fluidity in the Malay Sitcom Senario

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Abstract

This article examines the performance of non-heteronormative modes of gender in Malaysia's longest-running Malay sitcom, Senario. My close textual reading centres on two episodes to identify the show's linkages with broader Malay socio-cultural attitudes about gender fluidity. Three facets of Senario's non-heteronormativity are foregrounded: (1) the religio-cultural belief that gender fluidity, sexual deviancy, and non-heteronormative identities are 'conditions' that can be 'corrected'; (2) that this gender 'correction' is a recourse that privileges the masculine, and (3) that heteronormative binary roles are sustained even when imagining inversions of gender. By correlating these performances with wider religious and cultural beliefs/practices, and historical developments, it is observed that Senario's gender performatives were heavily influenced by, and inflected with, real-world biases towards non-heteronormative communities. This work represents a meaningful step towards addressing the present lacuna of critical scholarship on Malay television representations of non-heteronormative gender identities.

Keywords

1 Introduction

Not unlike other nations, questions about gender identities and their modes of articulation have been the focus of much contestation in Malaysia.1 The nation's tableau of state-sponsored religiosity, identity politics, and large-scale prioritization of traditional values have ensured that gender movements that go against the grain are often blamed for the erosion of religious and moral values. At least two realities exist in this present state of gender dynamics—a normalized, tiered system of gender relations that prioritizes men to varying degrees, and the broader conditions of communal social proprieties that undergird these modes of gender. These can be observed in Malaysian television, notably in the highly popular Malaysian Malay (hereafter referred to as Malay) sitcom Senario. While Senario is ‘only’ a sitcom, the show’s significant popularity with Malay audiences suggests these gender performances are accepted and, presumably, mirror lived realities. A symbiotic relationship therefore exists between Senario, Malay television more broadly, and Malay social reality.

This tacit acceptance by the show’s audiences is unsurprising when we consider that communal Malay understandings of gender modes are frequently interpreted through quotidian notions of ‘tradition’ and/or ‘culture’ (and their binary opposites).2 Female Malay identities, for instance, are often embroiled in, among other concerns, issues about femininity’s congruence with, and negotiation of, popular notions of tradition, modernity, and religious principles that are often informed by patriarchal status.3 My own work about the performances of female identities in Senario, and on Malay television more broadly, confirms the televisual reconstruction of this reality (Lee 2017, 2018, 2019). However, there are no critical studies that focus on the performances of effeminacy or non-heteronormativity in Malay television or Senario, even as non-heteronormative communities continue to live in precarious spaces at the periphery of Malaysia’s religio-cultural norms.

This article aims to address that lacuna by positing two questions to identify linkages between Senario’s performances of non-heteronormativity and broader Malay socio-cultural attitudes towards these communities: (1) how are non-heteronormativity and effeminacy performed in Senario, specifically in

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the forms they take, and (2) what do these performances reveal about dominant Malay cultural and communal beliefs and perceptions of non-heteronormative behaviours? My broader research on Senario (1996–2013) assessed 66 episodes out of a total of 629 episodes produced across a period of 17 years. Out of these 66 episodes, ‘Salah sangka’ (Ahmad F. and Anniesafinas 2011) and ‘Bina semangat’ (Fauzita and Anniesafinas 2007) are two that feature the most explicit non-heteronormative performances. These two episodes will be the focus of our analysis.

I will first introduce the sitcom Senario, followed by a brief discussion of Butlerian gender performativity and a historical overview of male-female actors and characters in traditional art performances within the Malay World. Some of the underlying metaphysical beliefs that allow for certain gender biases to exist will also be discussed to provide clarity on the motivations behind these traditional practices. A discussion of notable institutional considerations that went into the production of Senario will be included, before I provide a close textual analysis of select scenes from both episodes that signify effeminate and/or non-heteronormative behaviours. While most societies—if not all—are grappling with these same fundamental concerns resulting from what is essentially a traditional and patriarchal socio-political structure, I contend that the Malay case is somewhat atypical, for there has always been (and still is) a dominant rigid insistence on a traditional, early-twentieth century Malay rubric of identity within an increasingly globalized twenty-first century Malaysia. This will become clear as my analysis progresses.

2 Senario, Creative Perambulations, and Institutional Boundaries

Senario is the title of a Malay-language situation comedy that was produced and broadcast on Media Prima Berhad’s channel TV3 from the years 1996 to 2013. It began with seven participants from the 1995 television talent show Sinaran pasport kegemilangan (Spotlight, the passport to glory) that was produced and aired annually by TV3 from 1994–2002 (‘Senario in person’, 1999). These seven participants were given the opportunity to produce a television programme of their own and, in June 1996, an introductory four-episode sitcom, Senario, began to be broadcast on Media Prima’s Malay channel, TV3 (‘Senario in person’, 1999). The original cast of Senario consisted of Shamsul Ghau-Ghau, Mazlan Pet Pet (Lan Pet Pet), Farouk Hussein, Wahid Mohammad, Ilya Buang, Hamdan Ramli, and Azlee Jaafar.4 The cast changed several times between 1997

4 Based on the archived episodes reviewed in the Resource Department’s Ingest Room 1, Sri Pentas, TV3, between October 2015 and February 2016.
and 2001, and by 2002, Wahid, Lan Pet Pet, and Azlee were the only remaining original cast members on the show. They would be joined by other non-core cast members until the end of its production in 2013.

While Senario was primarily the title of the show, it subsequently became the name of the group when the cast released a music album alongside the sitcom. The group’s first album in 1999 was among the top 10 highest-grossing albums in Malaysia, and this success led to several other albums and numerous live music performances and concerts in Singapore, Brunei, and many parts of Malaysia in subsequent years (‘Senario in person’, 1999). At the height of its popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s, Senario was therefore not just a television sitcom. Rather, it was synonymous with an entire spectrum of entertainment that ranged from radio music, television music (many music videos were produced), television sitcom, movies, music concerts, and event performances, to national and regional road shows. As a Malaysian entertainment group in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Senario was institutional.

From the perspective of genre or format, unlike a conventional sitcom, Senario does not feature recurring narratives, characters, or locations. There are occasionally two-part episodes, but these, like other single episodes, are self-contained. Archival data at Media Prima’s Resource Centre lists 629 episodes of Senario, which were produced between 1996 and 2013. In the early years of the show and at the height of its popularity, Senario was broadcast during weekdays at prime time, but the show was moved to a weekly Saturday afternoon slot after 2000. While Senario is no longer produced, TV3 nonetheless still shows re-runs of old episodes.

Hisyam, a former long-serving member of Senario’s creative and production team who was key to the show’s development and direction, explained that the show’s stories during the time of his involvement were based on real-life stories scripted from the writer-director’s conversations with friends.

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5 Senario spawned 10 feature films: Senario the movie (Aziz 1999), Senario lagi (Shamsul and Aziz 2000), Lagi-lagi Senario (Ahmad P. et al. 2001), Lang buana (Johari, Lazizah, and Mamat 2003), Senario XX (Aziz 2005), Senario pemburu emas Yamashita (Aziz 2006), Senario the movie Episod 1 (Ahmad I. and Teo 2008), Senario the movie Episod 2: Beach boys (Ahmad I. and Teo 2009), Senario asam garam (Hatta and Teo 2010), and Senario the movie: Ops Pocot (Ismail and Teo 2011).

6 The name Hisyam is a pseudonym. I have chosen to anonymize his/her identity, which also means I will not provide more specific information regarding the time period of his/her involvement with Senario. While I may refer to Hisyam as male in the text, this is merely to facilitate our discussions. All ethical considerations have been respected and Hisyam is fully aware of my research focus.
and family, and also his own life experiences. Nanovil Roy, the general manager of strategy and business development for Media Prima in 2004, recounts that Senario’s team was heavily influenced by local Malay popular culture at the time, with one example being the popular Malay cartoon magazine Gila-Gila (Crazy-Crazy). Both Hisyam’s and Roy’s accounts reveal that the connoted ideological experience-vision of the sitcom’s text can be ascriptive and is closely intertwined with popular Malay consciousness within a specific point in time. Like most constituents of popular culture, the nature of this relationship places an importance on understanding what Senario communicates to its demographic—a viewership that Media Prima’s data and then chief executive officer Ahmad Izham Omar have indicated is overwhelmingly non-urban and Malay.

In terms of censorship, on-air media censorship and content approval is slightly different at Media Prima compared to other producers of television content in Malaysia. According to Media Prima’s Resource Centre executive Farah Asmanina, the broadcaster’s censorship and approval process occurs on-site, within their premises at Seri Pentas, Bandar Utama, Selangor. Former production member Hisyam explained that the large volume of weekly content produced by Media Prima, and the speed by which it is broadcast—for Senario, typically within fourteen days from the studio recording, which includes censorship processes—makes this on-site approval process an ideal arrangement. To minimize obstacles for productions to go on-air at the scheduled time slot, directors and producers ensure a certain degree of institutional compliance even before a programme is filmed, as explained by Hisyam in the following excerpt:


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7 Personal communication, 10-10-2015.
8 American MAD magazine is perhaps the nearest Western equivalent to the Malay-language Gila-Gila. This Malay magazine was printed on newsprint paper and featured black-inked illustrations within comic panels. Gila-Gila was very popular in Malaysia during the 1980s and 1990s.
9 Personal communication, 24-10-2015.
11 One task of MPB’s Resource Centre is the archiving and cataloguing of all Media Prima television content.
12 Personal communication, 22-12-2015.
13 Personal communication, 10-10-2015.
LPF. Dia tak ada trial error, hantar skrip dulu ke, takde. So jadi kita, bila nak tahu ada guideline dia, jadi kita tengoklah, kita hati-hati lah ... Lepas tu tak boleh sentuh apa politik, apa semua. Itu tak boleh sentuh ... tak boleh sentuh politik, paling-paling kita tak boleh sentuh. Benda yang sensitif saja yang ada kaitan dengan race.

No need [for script pre-approvals]. This LPF [censors], they told us—during that period—we were told to complete it first. Complete it, then they’ll have a look. That’s LPF’s style. There is no trial and error, nor can we submit the script first, no. So for us, if we want to know what the guidelines are, we will have to observe, and we’ll have to be careful ... Further, politics and anything related to it are off-limits. We cannot touch on the issue, cannot touch politics, that’s absolutely something we can’t touch on. Also, sensitive issues associated with race.

In the above excerpt, we note the primary factor underscoring Hisyam’s compliance with censorship guidelines in the production of Senario is economic in nature. Moreover, his reference to ‘stail LPF’ (LPF’s style) of censorship describes a process that is not entirely explicit in its stipulations. This account of self-imposed compliance does, in fact, align with my own experiences of producing content for Malaysian television (1995–2010), where self-censorship and erring on the side of caution is usually the practice, for very little can be left to chance due to cost and time considerations. This tendency to self-censor to minimize any potential issues with the censorship board also broadly aligns with the observations of Karthigesu (1994), Sonia, Puah, and Loone (2005), and Zaharom and Mustafa (2000). By all accounts, this translates to largely ‘safe’ television content that introduces and/or reaffirms the status quo as interpreted by the state.

3 Gender Dynamics in Early Southeast Asian Performances

At the centre of our discussions on non-heteronormativity is the Butlerian notion of performativity, which posits that gender is non-essentialist and is defined through its own performative actions (Butler 1999). This performative nature therefore challenges normative social scripts, where culturally constructed ideas about binary gender ascribe predetermined heteronormative categories to individuals. In short, gender is real only to the extent that it is performed, since a series of actions that recur (performatives) are what constitute identity. Gender identity is therefore never rigidly categorized in a way that cannot be continually redefined through one’s performatives.
My deployment of the term ‘performance’ further references an actor’s on-screen performance of gender roles that strives to portray masculinity or femininity in a particular way to render gender legible to audiences and, in the process, establishes or reaffirms ideas of gendered activity (Butler 2004). In this sense, the performatives of an actor’s gender portrayals rely on the audiences’ understanding of gender in lived reality, to ensure that their identities are recognized. Gendered activities can, however, only be readable within a series of constraints since these represent the boundaries of socially accepted norms. As we will observe from my analysis of Senario, characters who express desire and gender that lie outside of these constraints are pressured to perform identities that align with normative categories.

It should be noted that the culture of male actors in the role of female characters within the performing arts is not a new occurrence, nor is it historically atypical in many art practices globally. There is similarly a long tradition of male stage performers playing female roles in Southeast Asia. In the Indonesian stage dance Ludruk for instance, integral female roles have traditionally been performed by men (Brandon 2009; Osnes 2001; Peacock 1987). They were often called ‘female impersonators’ (Osnes 2001:200; Peacock 1987:206), both for their performances on stage as well as their performatives off-stage as ‘transvestites’ (Peacock 1987:175, 204, 207). The reality that most, if not all, female impersonators in traditional arts (in the past) within the region were non-heteronormative off-stage extended to Malaysia’s traditional Mak Yong stage performers, who are also historically described as ‘transvestites’ (Peletz 2009:186–8; Raybeck 1986:65; Yousof 1976:53). Their widespread acceptance by feudal society was evidenced by royal patronage of these performance troupes, as well as the existence of royal courtiers and priests who were openly non-heteronormative in the royal palaces (Peletz 2009). While these works refer to them as transvestites, in truth, the described activities would indicate that their gender identities were not merely confined to this single non-heteronormative category.

These regional traditions suggest that gender pluralism and fluidity existed historically, and their presence in the arts may be socially benign and well accepted. In the decades after the introduction/revivification of Islam post-1900, however, the prevalence of actors playing opposite gender roles were progressively reduced, motivated by ideas of ‘sin’, ‘morals’, and gender differentials that are rooted in the assumed religious legitimacy of male power and authority.14 Central to this argument of Islamic male power/authority are two

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beliefs, namely: (1) the implicit naturalized position of women as weaker than men; and (2) that religio-cultural ilmu (knowledge) and akal (reason) are concentrated in men, which functions to legitimize and naturalize male (spiritual) strength.

It is relevant here to provide a cultural context to the traditional and religious Malay metaphysical beliefs that undergird conventional gender binaries. Primary among religio-cultural beliefs that encourage a dichotomization of gender roles is the notion of akal (reason) and its diametric opposite nafsu (desire/passion). The perpetual struggle for dominance between bodily passions-desires and reason-rationality consequently determines one's actions and behaviour. ‘Proper’ actions—that is to say, actions that conform to communal social and religious mores—are thus regarded as ‘rationality’s’ dominance over ‘passion’, while ‘improper’ actions reveal a lack of, or inability to control, one’s baser desires.

Therefore, it seems clear, even if not explicitly expressed by scholars, that conformity to religio-cultural traditions/customs is indicative of reason, while religio-culturally ‘deviant’ behaviour reveals a desire/passion-governed individual. These notions are inflected with pan-Islamic constructions that situate women as more ‘emotional, sexual, and irrational than men’, who hence ‘must be carefully controlled by men so that they do not lead the latter astray from the proper path, thereby wreaking havoc on the social and religious order’ (Brenner 1995:30–1). This reasoning is contradictory, however, for if men have better control of their desires/lust, it follows that they would not easily be swayed by the seduction of women, rendering the need to control women unnecessary.

Another notion of religious and cultural import is ilmu, described as possessing a broad range of cultural meanings, two of which are ‘esoteric or mystical knowledge’ and ‘spiritual potency’ (Ismail 2003; Peletz 1996; Woods 2007). Taken together, the akal-ilmu cultural rubric determines that dominance of desire/passion in women is likely to impede any potential female advancement in ascetic practices (Brenner 1995; Peletz 1996), which thus strengthens the perception of the mystical and religious potency and strength of men. It is interesting that ilmu, within the context of performance art, refers to a kind of ‘know-

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ledge that enables artists—including musicians, dancers, and puppeteers—to enrapture, mesmerize, and in some cases, heal’ (Sunardi 2015:45) and is therefore ‘knowledge’ that can be attained by both male and female performers of traditional arts. This meaning is, however, specific to stage performers of traditional performances and broadly refers to ‘stage presence’ and the performers’ affective ability to attract viewers into relishing ‘the work in an almost gustatory way’ (Walton 2007:32). As such, our discussions will only refer to the first meaning.

There is another consideration for the power dynamics behind female impersonation. Former performer Mr Soenarto notes that this practice is ‘an artefact of the feudal era when people did not want to look at genuine women but at those who create an illusion of women’s qualities’ (Peacock 1987:171). This additional symbolic layer aligns to the normalized mistrust of women who, left unchecked, are likely to lead men astray. Since women cannot be trusted to ‘behave’ and thus ‘perform’ traditional social proprieties, female impersonation realizes the male’s imagined feminine ideal. I argue elsewhere, that this projection of a male-imagined feminine ideal is made discernible since, unlike ‘true’ female characters, Senario’s impersonated female characters are never presented as culturally or religiously ‘deviant’ (Lee 2017, 2019).

Traditional practices and the legitimizing of religio-cultural beliefs in Malay television are therefore both observed in the male appropriation of female representation. Symbolically, this reasserts male authority and voicings with respect to the roles of women in both social (since they are performed publicly on stage and on television) and domestic (since the performances are set within household narratives) contexts. This is relevant to our discussion for, as we will observe in the analysis, Senario’s gender-fluid characters still largely perform within the rubric of this male-female gender binary. In the next section we will observe how the institutional considerations faced by Senario’s content producers centre on these same socio-cultural sensitivities.

4 Performances on Contemporary Malay Television

While Senario features female actors playing female roles, it also frequently features male actors performing female roles. The converse—female actors playing male characters—has never occurred. These male actors do not perform as cross-dressers or transvestites when playing female roles, nor do they exaggerate female mannerisms to create humour through the obvious gender incongruity. Note here the distinction between male actors playing female characters, and those playing non-heteronormative characters acting like females.
This distinction is clear since, while played by men, female characters like Nenek Yan in the episode *Raya ... raya ... raya* (Celebrate ... celebrate ... celebrate) (Jamil, Ilya and Norwani 1998) are completely convincing in their performance of female roles. On this basis, it may be argued that viewers are neither meant to fixate on the gender incongruity between actor and character, nor does the gender disparity itself become, or contribute to, the comedy. There is a rational basis for this distinction in *Senario*.

Malaysia was arguably more accommodating of non-heteronormativity in the years before 1980. In early 1980, for instance, sex reassignment surgeries (SRS) were openly available at the University of Malaya Hospital and those who had undergone such surgeries could apply to have their national identification documents reflect their new gender (Gibson et. al 2016). In 1987, there was even a Federal Territory Mak Nyah (transgender) Association in Kuala Lumpur that sought small grants from the Federal Welfare Department for transgender women to start businesses in order to support themselves.17

However, Malaysia’s official religion is Islam, though it is not an Islamic nation, for there is a predominantly Malay, Chinese, and Indian citizenry that make up the nation’s multi-faith landscape. Resultantly, state Islamic councils viewed the accommodations of SRS and the Mak Nyah association as encouragements of what they perceived to be social ills, and both were abolished by 1990 (Gibson et. al 2016). The situation progressively deteriorated. Between 1990 and 2012, almost every governing agency introduced Sharia enactments that criminalized ‘a man posing as a woman’, including women considered as ‘tomboy’, or a ‘masculine woman’, exhibiting ‘masculine appearance or gestures’, or with ‘male sexual instinct’ (Human Rights Watch 2014).

In line with these developments, the national censorship board for film and television banned cross-gender and cross-dressed characters from television and cinematic screens at the end of 1999. More specific to sitcoms, the supporting rationale was that the portrayals were considered insulting to women, especially when these characters invariably became the ‘joke’. Some insight into the show’s use of ‘cross-gender’ characters prior to 1999 and the limits of acceptability by audiences is offered by my interview with Hisyam on 10 October 2015:

Dia *cross-gender* ni senang nak dapat *laughter*. *Cross-gender* ni senang *... bila diaorang jadi perempuan, laughter* senang dapat. Diaorang gerak

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It is easy to generate laughter through cross-gender [characters]. It's easy ... when they act as females, it's easy to achieve laughter. They move a little, their movements, there is already laughter there. Its already funny. You can get it with (snaps fingers) humour is easy. Its comedy that's fast, quick, easy, and you don't have to think about it. Ah ... don't have to think. ... when you watch them fall, or just trip, you see their movements, ah, it becomes easy. Very, very easy to get laughter if it's a female character. But, female characters can be a bit dangerous. If it is overdone, people will not like it. They will hate it, they will find it disgusting. So they have to keep it to a minimum. You can't overdo it. Can't be too enthusiastic [or too extroverted]—as a female, you can't. But ... ok, maybe they look like transgenders/cross-dressers but in the mind of the scriptwriter, it was not intended. There aren't any. But fema (corrects himself) effeminate male characters, there are. Effeminate male characters, yes.

Based on Hisyam's account, audiences laugh when there is a disparity between the true gender of the actor and the gender performed—when masculinity is feminized. His assertion that this humour is triggered quickly, without any need for thinking, also further grounds it on social expectations as the basis on which the disparities occur. The unproblematized performances of these ‘female impersonators’ and their reception by viewers can perhaps be explained in part by the long tradition of Southeast Asian male stage performers playing female roles as discussed earlier.

However, Hisyam also notes that if performances of femininity or effeminacy by male actors are taken to the extreme, it becomes a source of ‘disgust’ for viewers. This observation is fundamentally congruent with traditional Malay society from at least the 1980s, when Malay wedding organizers and bridal
makeup artists (and other such tasks often considered more feminine than masculine) were traditionally transgendered or effeminate men (Peletz 1996). Gender fluidity in men was traditionally tolerated since these men were often regarded as being ‘only’ gender fluid and not sexually ‘deviant’. Malay society at large, therefore, viewed them as curiosities and they were therefore not stigmatized, unless overtly sexually ‘deviant’, since it is believed that they would eventually revert to their biological identity when reconnected to their latent masculinity (Peletz 1996). In the same way, the act of a male performing femininity on Senario in an obviously ‘distorted’ way (extreme effeminacy or exaggerated female mannerisms) would suggest the character is more than just gender deviant, or acting beyond the dictates of cultural propriety.

Earlier content studies of Malay television focused largely on dramas and musical entertainment, due perhaps to both genres’ early proliferation since the 1970s (McDaniel 1994; Noor Bathi 1996; Zaharom and Mustafa 2000). Works relating to Malaysian sitcoms, when mentioned however briefly, tend to only give an overview of content produced in the 1980s and 1990s (Noor Bathi 1996). Sitcoms such as the short-lived 2 + 1 (Othman 1991) and Jangan ketawa (Don’t laugh) (Cheong and Harith 1991), are arguably the only two Malaysian sitcoms that feature non-heteronormative main characters. Both had only brief runs on television as they quickly came to be at odds with the enactments of the national and state Islamic councils during the same period. These two sitcoms also predate the 1999 ban by the television censorship board.

While another popular sitcom, Baba & nyonya (Tan C. 1991), featured an impersonated female as its main character, it was not a non-heteronormative character but a portrayal of a female character by a male actor. On this basis, the performance was never problematized since viewers were presumably neither meant to fixate on the gender incongruity between actor and character, nor does the gender disparity itself become, or contribute to, the comedy. Like Baba & nyonya, and unlike 2 + 1 and Jangan ketawa, the male actors in Senario do not perform as cross-dressers or transvestites, nor do they exaggerate female mannerisms to create humour. As we will observe, this is dissimilar from the portrayals of feminine possessions, and effeminacy and boyish female mannerisms in the two episodes of Senario that are examined.

The analysis in the following sections will demonstrate that the appropriation of power by Senario’s male characters is not merely confined to female impersonation or female subordination. The analysis of ‘Salah sangka’ will foreground several instances where non-heteronormativity is perceived as being a temporary affliction, with religion being the recourse to the recovery of maleness. This foregrounds the salience of the previously discussed attitudes and cultural perceptions of traditional Malay society towards effeminate and non-
heteronormative groups and their ‘recovery’ of masculinity. The subsequent close reading of ‘Bina semangat’ unpacks a very different strategy, where effeminacy is further compared to ideals of masculinity and femininity by juxtaposing it against an overtly masculine female character.

5 Articulating the Recovery of Masculinity

The story of ‘Salah sangka’ (Mistaken/misunderstanding) (Ahmad F. and Anniesafinas 2011), centres on three inhabitants—a shaman named Wak Jali and two youths—of a Malay village. Two wandering spirits stumble upon the abode and gain entry to the house before spiritually possessing the youths. Wak Jali eventually expels the spirits from the bodies of the youths before learning that the spirits had returned to reclaim the soothers they had lost when they died as babies.

In this story, the only representation of non-male gender is the temporary effeminacy of one of the youths when he is spiritually possessed. This framing allows for a textual reading where the upsetting of social gender norms is invariably linked to an ‘affliction’ of femininity. In this story, effeminacy is caused by what is perceived to be a gendered possession, for spiritual possessions are culturally understood as a female affliction, which is communally ‘rationalized’ through the previously discussed *akal-nafsu* binary (Peletz 1996:157–89). The possessions of originally male host bodies are thus presented as subordinations of what should have naturally been male dominance, or simply, the female appropriation of male authority. Here, the traditionally gendered nature of possessions is clearly signified through the temporary effeminacy, and male rationality is eventually regained through Islamic exorcism.

The symbolism for each of the textual layers associated with possession thus becomes clear. For it is not simply the absence of females but the oblique representation of a distorted femininity through the negative implications of gendered possessions that signifies a loss of male *akal*. The exorcism by the shaman Wak Jali’s *ilmu* (believed to be concentrated in men) thus reasserts male authority by applying and regaining the masculine *akal* and expelling the feminine distortion. The representation of a distorted femininity is key, for it signifies a distortion of the ‘natural’ gender order of Islam caused by a usurpation of male authority.

Key to this reading is one youth’s performative when under possession, where he sings the hit song ‘Nobody’ by the popular K-pop (Korean pop) girl group Wonder Girls, accompanied by effeminate hand gestures and shoulder movements that mirror almost exactly the dance routine in the official music
video. He starts singing from the chorus, which is in English, but when it reaches the Korean verses, there is the presence of some Chinese Hainanese dialect. When Wak Jali, as the village shaman, attempts to exorcize him, the youth—presumably still in character as one of the Wonder Girls’ female singers—says in an effeminate voice, with accompanying exaggerated feminine gestures, ‘eh, buat apa tu?’ (eh, what are you doing?). The youth then falls back onto a sofa, signifying a successful exorcism, and Wak Jali asks both youths for their names. One youth says ‘Wonder’ while the other replies ‘Wonder Girl’, to which Wak Jali responds, ‘Nak tukar jadi siapa?’ (‘Who do you want to change into?’ or ‘Who do you want to become?’). The previously singing youth replies, ‘Wonder Man’, before Wak Jali eventually returns them to their ‘normal’ selves.

The youth’s performance of the song by Wonder Girls is not incidental, for it was highly popular in Malaysia and is thus readily identifiable when reproduced on-screen. Its deployment by the youth is, however, meant to connote the wider discourse of K-pop’s unsuitability to Malay(sian) culture. Central to this connotation of ‘unsuitability’ is the utterance of the old Chinese Hainanese phrase ‘nang bo ti nang, kui bo ti kui’ (human not like a human, ghost not like a ghost), which is qualified by his random singing of the K-pop song while possessed, and acting beyond the acceptable rubric of cultural proprieties and Islam. The signifier of ‘unsuitability’ is further associated with the suggestion of effeminacy signified by the adoption of a discernibly feminine persona.

The youth’s request to turn from ‘Wonder Girl’ to ‘Wonder Man’, just before the exorcism is complete, explicitly references the dominant communal belief that non-heteronormative or gender deviant behaviours and tendencies are afflictions and thus ‘curable’ through religion or by medical science. Consider the widespread state Islamic-sponsored ‘anti-gay camp’ issue that arose in the same year, where the conservative Malaysian state of Kelantan ‘identified’ 66 schoolboys for an ‘anti-gay camp’, allegedly for displaying ‘feminine mannerisms’.

'could end up gay or transsexual'. This is indicative of concerns in that particular year regarding non-normative gender and sexual identities/behaviours in both socio-national discourse as well as popular Malaysian consciousness. This would also explain the inclusion of such a theme on Senario in that same year.

The constant in the entire scene is Wak Jali, who can only be contextually construed as a metonym for Islam. This is signified symbolically through his utterance of the Islamic verse ‘B-īsmi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi’ (In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful) that precedes the exorcism. The significance of this performative establishes Wak Jali’s authority and ability to expel from the Malay Muslim subject that which is foreign as powers conferred by God. Since it is mediated through Islam, and normality is recovered through Islamic piety, it proposes that redemption can only be effected by a return to the Islamic faith, which ironically was the motivation behind the 2011 anti-gay camp.

The observed male appropriation of agency over female constructions, its symbolic association to gender-fluid characters, and the presence of religious male voices to determine cultural constructions of non-heteronormative identities both reveal a similar underlying anxiety over the loss of male control over gender identities. Here, it extends the male problematization of femininity and women (Lee 2019) to the non-heteronormative category. One explanation for this anxiety and its manifestation as an excess of control, lies perhaps with a communal anxiety over Malay masculinity itself. Senario’s illustration of this male control and the underlying anxiety is, however, not always as ‘straight-forward’. One episode that subtextually communicates this male anxiety and control through an inversion of the normative gender binary is the 2007 episode ‘Bina semangat’ (Build motivation/spirit) (Fauzita and Anniesafinas 2007).

6 Bina Semangat

The cultural meanings of the word semangat broadly refer to an individual’s ‘life force’ (Peletz 1996:105), though it also relates to how ‘spirited’ one is, or one’s ‘energy’ and ‘motivation’. This explains why a ‘motivation camp’ is termed ‘kem bina semangat’ (motivation-building camp) in Malay. The episode ‘Bina semangat’ is thus a story of four youths who are sent to a motivation-building camp. The effeminate Kassim, the overweight Azim, and the former boy scout in Malaysia sent to “anti-gay” camp’, BBC News, 19-4-2011; ‘Malaysia’s anti-gay camp violates law says minister’, BBC News, 20-4-2011.
Razak were sent to the camp by their parents for being *lemah semangat* (weak in motivation or unspirited). Seri Ayu, who is the only female character (and actor), was sent to the camp by her parents because she is too spirited (*terlebih semangat*). Mat is the fierce, militant trainer with a large, thick moustache that he wears with pride as a symbol of his overt masculinity. The five characters go through several tests to build their motivation and team spirit. Mat is revealed as a fraud when he starts bawling upon hearing that his cat has died. His moustache is subsequently revealed as a fake stick-on before the episode ends.

The themes of this episode are primarily illustrated through three characters—the effeminate Kassim, the hyper-masculine trainer Mat, and the masculine girl Seri. Each of these characters encapsulates one of the three dimensions of our discussion: Seri is the strong, non-relational/non-domestic female subject who resists being feminized; Kassim represents the negotiation between male-female binaries that conforms to the Othered non-heteronormative category; and Mat performs the ‘masculine ideal’ who attempts to mediate both the ‘affliction’ of effeminacy and the usurpation of male power when masculinity is performed on the wrong end of the gender binary. Each will be discussed in turn through the episode’s narrative progression.

Like *akal* and *ilmu*, the metaphysical *semangat* (‘spirit’ as opposed to ‘motivation’) is culturally believed to be concentrated in men (Peletz 1996:186, 200, 207; Resner and Hartog 1970:377). Ideologically, being explicitly declared ‘*terlebih semangat*’ thus labels Seri not merely as too spirited but also too masculine; her attitude and comportment is demonstrably more masculine than that of all the male characters. Her lack of the general qualities of Malay femininity thus disassociates Seri from the usual Malay construction of relational gender identity. On this basis, Seri’s presence at the camp is presumably caused by her parents’ wish for her to be feminized. Meta-narratively, Seri’s masculine power needs to be neutralized by Mat’s hyper-masculinity, which is signified through his position of authority as a trainer. The camp’s militarist quality is key, for this mnemonically signifies an unchallengeable military hierarchy so that the signifier ‘Mat’ has adequate symbolic power to successfully counteract Seri’s overt masculinity.

Mat’s attempts at feminizing Seri are first introduced in a scene where Mat takes Seri’s measurements on the pretext of obtaining sizing for uniforms. While traditional proprieties are respected—he only measures her shoulders and height, both from her back—he also conveys his lust by rubbing his hands, inspecting Seri from head to toe, and paying extra attention to this measuring process that is starkly missing when he measures the boys. Seri, however, is totally oblivious or indifferent to this overt sexualizing of her body, and even
takes a deep breath to enlarge her chest, which is an act similar to men ‘puffing up’ their chests to simulate bigger pectorals. The boys start wolf-whistling, though that does not faze her either. Seri’s single-minded focus on her own masculinization results in an unawareness that her body is being objectified. If she does notice but is indifferent to it, it then signifies a disconnect from her female sexuality, for she cannot identify and relate to the thing that is objectified. She is, instead, absorbed in becoming more masculine, by accentuating her symbolic maleness (puffed-up chest).

This objectification of Seri and her attendant feminization is observed again when Mat calls Seri ‘darling’. When Seri objects to that term, Mat chides, ‘hey, kau melawan lelaki ya! Tambah dia jadi laki kau, kau nak?’ (hey, are you challenging a man? Do you want [me] to ‘add’ him as your man? [points to Kassim]). Mat’s imposition of a relational identity—since ‘romantic’ relations necessitate a counterpart—functions with the presumed inherent gender position of females as being subservient to men. Kassim, signifying this female subservience in contrast to the masculine Seri, is therefore a subliminal reference by Mat that hints at the gender inversion. However, as the story unfolds, we will observe that even though genders may be inverted, the gender binary is rigidly adhered to.

Seri is made to choose a male partner and she chooses effeminate Kassim. Mat tells Kassim: ‘awak kena jadi kekasih kepada Seri. Sebab apa—bagi pengalaman semangat kepada Seri yang tak berminat pada lelaki’ (you need to be a love-interest to Seri. Reason why—give some semangat experience to Seri who has no interest in men). In spite of the inversion of normative gender roles with respect to biological sex, Seri’s choice of Kassim still conforms to conventionally understood categories of masculine-feminine binaries. If Seri had chosen the hyper-masculine Mat, for instance, a homoerotic meaning would have been signified instead. However, the choice of Kassim means the cultural semangat binarism is upheld, for Seri’s abundantly strong (and hence masculine) spirit is complementary to Kassim’s weak (and hence feminine) spirit. Of note is the inherent stronger-weaker power dynamics within this gendered ideological pairing. While this may be accurate from Seri’s perspective, it will soon become clear that pre-existing cultural obligations mean that Kassim’s effeminacy is thus neutralized by Seri, and he is instead forced to reconnect with his maleness by role-playing as a man. This is observed in the following scene.

When Seri breaks off their role-play handholding, Kassim retorts in a non-effeminate and brusquely male manner, ‘hey! Kau melawan lelaki ya? ... Kau, kalau nak jalan dengan aku, mata kau tu, jangan tengok jantan-jantan lain!’ (Hey! You are challenging a man, ya? ... If you want to walk with me, your
eyes, [need to] stop looking at other males). This brusque retort further establishes metonymically that Kassim still possesses a degree of latent masculinity. Signified through his tone and delivery, and by the actual message communicated, the narrative’s hint at Kassim’s latent masculinity seems to televisually reconstruct the previously discussed Malay communal belief that all transvestites or effeminate men need only to be ‘convinced they are men’ (Peletz 1996:130). This communal understanding of male gender fluidity presumes a suppressed or dormant state of masculinity which is consonant with the subtext’s implied proposition that Kassim’s present gender orientation can be ‘corrected’.

Subtextually, Kassim’s outburst forces him out of the third space (as he is neither male nor female), since he is called to perform his gender in accordance with norms associated with the male sex. Kassim responds to Seri’s challenge to his male authority by allowing his latent masculinity to come to the fore. Gender binaries thus remain stable and undisrupted, even if he is ‘temporarily’ afflicted with the possession of dominant nafsu—for the inherent strength of male akal will ultimately prevail. The subtext thus draws upon the cultural and religious notion that ‘men need only be convinced of their maleness’ to inoculate against disruptions to the binary. However, Kassim’s ‘recuperation’ of masculinity is signified by aggression towards Seri’s agency—his tone and comportment when he warns Seri seem to contain a threat of violence. This proposes an antagonistic male position as a legitimate form of power reappropriation when faced by women who challenge their authority.

This proposition of male aggression is made explicit (though an inversion of who is ‘male’) in the following sequence, where Seri responds threateningly to Kassim’s outburst, ‘apa kau cakap tadi? Ulang balik, ulang balik’ (What did you just say? Say it again, say it again). Kassim recoils to his previous effeminate self and coyly says ‘takda apa, takda apa’ (nothing, nothing). Seri then grabs him by his shirt collar while saying ‘kurang ajar!’ (rude!) and throws him onto the ground while threatening to ‘Pijak kau, kalau kata lagi. Faham?!’ (I’ll stomp on you if you say it again. Understood?!). Seri’s re-establishment of her masculine authority over Kassim is achieved through the same aggression implicit in Kassim’s retort. Kassim’s ‘recuperation’ of masculinity is thus a temporary performance and there is, ultimately, no true redistribution of power since the symbolic male—Seri—still exhibits the same strategies towards the symbolic female—Kassim. Even in the subtext’s symbolic representations of non-heteronormativity, it demonstrably adheres to the rigid binary of male-female, and the rivalrous structure of protagonist-antagonist. Interestingly, Seri is constructed as firmly ensconced in her ‘problematic’ position. In contrast to
Seri, the signifying of Kassim’s latent masculinity illustrates the potential for a return to a ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ male Malay identity.

The power dynamic demonstrated by Seri over Kassim is similarly reflected in Mat’s symbolic power over Seri. Both Mat’s and Kassim’s aggressive positions towards Seri are introduced using the same words, ‘kau melawan lelaki ya?’ (you’re challenging a man, are you?). Their aggressions are thus ideologically ‘justified’ as a legitimate male strategy to counteract subjective female agency. This same male aggression is similarly observed in Kassim’s warning to Seri, which counteracts Kassim’s own effeminacy. Moreover, Seri’s biological sex, as opposed to performed and identified gender, transforms her body into a representation of the binary in question. Mat’s attempt at feminizing Seri through the sexualization of her body is, in fact, meant to reconnect Seri with her ‘latent’ femininity, much like Kassim’s latent masculinity. However, Seri’s indifferent or oblivious response marks her out as being unable to identify with (or to resist) the ‘re-inversion’. While the dynamics of power remain similar, the awareness of performed gender is markedly different between Seri and Kassim; Seri ‘knows’ she is a ‘man’, even though society says otherwise, while Kassim is less confident and fluidly negotiates between both genders.

The question, therefore, is: does ‘Bina semangat’ feature the performance of ‘correct’ gender roles? Or is the episode a social commentary on how popular discourse attempts to (re)define ‘traditional’ notions of gender? More specifically, is the subtext of ‘Bina semangat’ merely reflecting quotidian norms of gender ambiguity, and inversions of binary roles in general? It is particularly enticing to read ‘Bina semangat’ from this perspective, since the narrative demonstrates gender ‘deviance’ and the attempts at ‘correcting’ them, but acknowledges that the attempts are ultimately unsuccessful (Kassim and Seri are still ‘unchanged’). This open-ended nature to ‘Bina semangat’ is a departure from Senario’s usual episodic formula for, unlike almost all of the episodes viewed, it does not attempt to prescribe a workable solution.

Mat’s breakdown signifies as much, for his hyper-masculine façade is a performance that cannot be maintained. His public bawling, which leads to a revelation that his moustache—the symbol of his overt masculinity—is also a fake, suggests that Seri is after all, the most masculine amongst them. An antagonistic or overtly masculine insistence on clear gender roles is thus unsustainable and identified as an ineffective position—since Seri and Kassim are left ‘uncorrected’, even though they were temporarily made to perform ‘correctly’. Kassim’s momentary lapse into normative masculinity, however, signifies the belief that non-normative gendered Other Malays, at least, can return to their biological gender, reflecting the biological-psychological discourse that com-
monly undergirds the nation’s gender ‘re-education’ initiatives.\textsuperscript{22} However, it is implied that this recourse is only possible when the ‘affliction’ involves men, and Seri is not portrayed as having a similar kind of feminine latency that can be ‘recovered’.

In hindsight, the episode’s title plays on the duality of semangat’s meaning. We are told that this is a camp to ‘bina semangat’ (motivate), though its cultural, metaphysical meaning is never alluded to narratively. Subtextually, however, the camp is a correctional facility that seeks to align each character’s gender more ‘properly’ or ‘naturally’ to their biological sex as framed through the gendered signifier of semangat. This need for gender to be ‘legible’ through performatives that are in accordance with distinct poles of male-female is broadly consonant with the communal need to mark gender through traditional roles determined by both cultural and Islamic gender ideologies.

7 Conclusion

This article foregrounded three facets of Senario’s reproduction of Malay religio-cultural attitudes towards non-heteronormativity: (1) the religio-cultural belief that gender fluidity, sexual deviancy, and non-heteronormative identities are ‘conditions’ that can be ‘corrected’; (2) that this gender ‘correction’ is a recourse that privileges the masculine; and (3) that heteronormative binary roles are sustained, even when imagining inversions of gender. By correlating these performances with wider religio-cultural beliefs/practices and historical developments, I observed that Senario’s gender performatives were heavily influenced by, and inflected with, real-world biases towards non-heteronormative communities.

It is clear that the shift away from positive attitudes to gender/sex caused by the re-emphasis on conservative interpretations of state Islam in the mid 1900s resulted in the heightened climate of cultural religiosity in which both ‘Salah sangka’ and ‘Bina semangat’ were imagined, created, and consumed. This potentially explains the prevailing value of traditional masculinity within Malay society,\textsuperscript{23} which continues to identify effeminacy and ‘soft’ physical traits


\textsuperscript{23} Some scholars have theorized that the contest between genders in Malay films reveals
as signs of emasculation (Nur Syuhada, Bahiyah, and Kesumawati 2018; Zahra et al. 2013). ‘Transgressive’ genders in ‘Salah sangka’ and ‘Bina semangat’ are, therefore, encapsulations of these religio-cultural male anxieties presented in legible forms. One clear example is the effeminate K-pop ‘possession’ in ‘Salah sangka’, which reflects the anxieties of emasculation that were identified in these same studies about metrosexualized men in Korean popular culture (Nur Syuhada, Bahiyah, and Kesumawati 2018).

The persistent articulation of non-heteronormative micro-agency in lived reality is frequently regarded as an overt challenge by some quarters to state patriarchal and religious power. If Senario’s performances are indicative of the media’s efforts to reaffirm compliance to state religious dictates, then a dialectical paradox exists, for Senario’s inclusion of gender diversity is writ large on national television and acknowledged, even if they are alluded to reductively. Gender performativity is, at its core, successful, since the existence of genders that are self-defined are acknowledged as existing within the Malay imaginary. Therein lies the dialectical paradox, for though Senario stages gender fluidity as the object of the narrative’s (and by extension, communal) vilification, it similarly establishes a broader discursive terrain for these identities on a national scale.

Ultimately, while some may justify these televisual performances as being aligned with acts, behaviours, and social scripts found in lived reality generally, these social scripts and attitudinal/behavioural codes are, in fact, part of the patriarchal discourse on Malay Muslim women and gender/sexual minorities. With this reality, Senario’s performances of gender are not merely reflective of the subordinate, gender-fluid subject within a male patriarchal discourse; they function to further entrench and re-legitimize the implicit imbalance of power within a rigid Malay religio-cultural rubric of gender relations.

References

Bibliography


an unsettled modern Malay modernity, though these theorizations only account for binary genders and do not directly address non-heteronormative identities. I have chosen, instead, to include data from more quantitative studies that specifically investigate notions of Malay masculinity that circulate in social spaces, and attendant perceptions of Malay emasculation.


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Gender inversions and fluidity in the Malay sitcom Senario


**Filmography**


