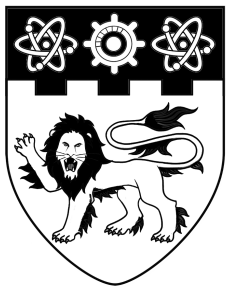

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF YOUTH'S ENGAGEMENT WITH ETHNICISED THEMES IN LOCAL FILMS

HUMAIRAH BINTE ZAINAL

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

2018

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HUMAIRAH BINTE ZAINAL

Division of Sociology

School of Social Sciences

A thesis submitted to Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance and support of many important figures in my postgraduate life. I borrow this space to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to them.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, **Assoc. Prof. Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir** for being a huge inspiration and role model in my academic journey since the start of my doctoral programme. His scholarly competence, amazing dedication and constant encouragement have inspired me to complete my dissertation in a timely manner and to continually strive for excellence in my scholarly pursuits. Beyond his formal role as my advisor, he has taught me a great deal about how to go about conducting excellent research. I would not have gone this far without his professional guidance and generous advice on my works and on academia in general.

I am also grateful to those whom I have had the pleasure to work with for this research and other related projects. I am especially indebted to my dissertation committee members, **Assoc. Prof. Sam Han** and **Assoc. Prof. Hadijah Rahmat** for their insightful comments and intellectual engagement throughout this project. Advisory meetings with them have always been so enlightening. I cannot thank them enough for instilling in me the confidence to pursue my academic endeavours and for grooming me into an aspiring scholar. **Assoc. Prof. Patrick Williams** has also been instrumental in challenging me to think more critically about research methodology through his graduate seminar, which has proven useful for my dissertation. The strong support that I received from the faculty at the Division of Sociology in NTU, especially **Prof. Zhou Min**, **Assoc. Prof. Kwok Kian Woon** and **Asst. Prof. Genaro Castro** has made my academic journey an enjoyable and intellectually stimulating one.

I also wish to extend my deepest appreciation to several colleagues who have played a tremendous role in my professional development as a scholar. A special note goes to **Dr. Faizah Zakaria**, **Asst. Prof. Oona Paredes** and all other colleagues from National University of Singapore who have been

supportive of my career goals and who have worked actively to offer me the assistance I need to pursue these goals despite their hectic schedules. Their friendship is what I cherish the most.

I would also like to foreground an important group of individuals who have lent me their support in the course of doing my fieldwork in Malaysia. A special thanks to **Assoc. Prof. Norsidah Ujang** and her students from the Department of Landscape Architecture at Universiti Putra Malaysia for allowing me to conduct preliminary research for my project. My sincere appreciation also goes out to **Ms Salbiah Rahman** from Unitar International University where my main fieldwork was conducted. Her warm hospitality and steadfastness in assisting me with campus facilities and participant recruitment enabled me to achieve my fieldwork goals.

This list will not end without mentioning the names of the faculty from University of Malaya who have been of great assistance to me during my visits to their institution. Of special mention are **Dr. Md Azalanshah Md Syed**, who has offered me critical insights for my works, and **Dr. Amira Sariyati Firdaus**, who has given me the opportunity to deliver a guest lecture on my research to her students during the course of my fieldwork. I am also indebted to the faculty from the **Gender Studies Programme** for their feedback on this project during my presentation at their Gender Studies Seminar Series.

My heartfelt gratitude also goes out to all my **informants** for their time and willingness to share their thoughts with me. Their enthusiasm in taking part in my research has spurred me on to work even harder for this dissertation. The friendship forged with them over the course of my fieldwork is something that I will treasure greatly. My intellectual endeavour has been less lonely because of them. In addition to friends in Malaysia, I would like to thank all other individuals who have enriched my research in various ways, and for being part of this journey.

Last but not least, nobody has been more important to me in the pursuit of this journey than my parents, **Zainal Siraj** and **Norani Abdullah**. I extend my

loving thanks to them for their prayers, company and support. I hope I have made them proud through this endeavour and will continue to make them proud, as I did not come this far to only come this far. In loving memory of my beloved grandmother, **Ranian Abdul Ghani**, who passed away the day before my oral defence, I dedicate this research to her.

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SUMMARY

This dissertation is a sociological study of young people's attitudes towards inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia based on their interpretations of ethnicised themes featured in local films. While sociological approaches to studying films have largely examined the ideological meanings of social life encoded in films, there remains a substantial gap in empirical analyses of the ways in which active audiences decode these meanings. Such a deficit is an epistemological lacuna that stands in the way of interrogating how films are understood from the audiences' perspectives. Adopting an intersectional framework, this research examines how Malaysian undergraduates engage with selected local films in relation to the broader socio-cultural and socio-political contexts of their everyday lives. Despite the burgeoning corpus of literature on intersectionality as a concept, theory and methodology, little has been written on how different social identities intersect in the context of everyday lives in multi-ethnic Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia. Proceeding from theory to practice, my research fills this gap by conducting an empirical investigation of media consumption that utilises films as sites where notions of ethnicity are negotiated in relation to the day-to-day lived experience of a culturally diverse audience.

Drawing on findings from a wide-scale ethnographic research in Malaysia, including compulsory film screening sessions, in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions with a total of 96 Malaysian undergraduates from two universities in the greater Kuala Lumpur region, the research interrogates the ways in which socially constructed categories of differences like ethnicity, religion, class and gender are interweaved in the respondents' narratives. Situated within the current context of state-sponsored Islamisation in Malaysia, it seeks to address how the undergraduates negotiate the structural impacts of Islamisation on their lived multi-ethnic experience.

Overall, the findings reveal that foregrounding the narratives of a multi-ethnic audience not only serves as important sources for uncovering their complex lived experience, but highlights how intersectional subjectivities are

reconstructed through interactions among social subjects. By treating meaning-making as a social process, the analysis illustrates how young people actively contest and negotiate the meanings of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. The dissertation argues that while the state rhetoric of Islamisation informs the undergraduates' articulations of ethnicised narratives to a certain extent, it is important not to adopt a homogenising view of the impacts of Islamisation on multi-ethnicity in Malaysia. This is because a comprehensive understanding of Islamisation in the country requires not just an examination of top-down, state-led initiatives, nor of bottom-up societal pressures, but of the dialectical relations of both macro and micro processes.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Cinematic Ethnic Order in Malaysia

Malaysian director Liew Seng Tat's feature film '*Lelaki Harapan Dunia'* or 'Men Who Save the World' (2014) won the 'Best Film Award' at the 27th Malaysian Film Festival in September 2015. Liew himself clinched the 'Best Director Award' at the festival. The film also bagged many other honours including 'Best Picture' and 'Best Original Story'. Despite the slew of accolades, critics have deemed the film racist due to its condescending attitude towards Malays, in particular the latter's obsession with traditionally held superstitious beliefs. Other controversies include resentment towards scenes that are perceived to condemn Malay corruptive practices and the Islamic ritual of animal slaughtering.

The film tells the story of Pak Awang, a rural villager who is preparing to marry off his only daughter. As a wedding gift, he intends to present her with a house built on stilts that he owns in the jungle. Recognising that his daughter would never live in the woods, he gathers his fellow villagers to assist him in moving the entire structure to the village. As the house-moving project begins, across the country in Kuala Lumpur, illegal African immigrant Solomon, a hardscrabble street vendor, flees the city after a tense scuffle with the police. Slipping away from a cargo truck where he has stowed away as it travels across the country, he flees into the forest and chances upon Pak Awang's isolated house, where he takes refuge. Wan, a local, spots Solomon in the house, mistakes him for a demon, and goes around informing the villagers that the house is haunted. The villagers believe that an '*orang minyak*' (oily man), a fictional character in Malay folklore known to rape women, lives in the house. A shaman then advises them to attack him. In their bid to lure the demon, they dress up as women. Their pursuit of hunting down the oily man results in the abandoning of the house-shifting project.

'*Lelaki Harapan Dunia*' is not the only local film that offers a critique of Malay social behaviour. Other local filmmakers, such as Mamat Khalid, have also reflected on the deeply held superstitious beliefs of Malay society towards supernatural beings

through his horror comedies '*Zombie Kampung Pisang*' ('The Zombie of Banana Village') (2007) and its sequel, '*Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah*' ('The Ghost of Mdm Limah Returns Home' (2010). Many other Malay-language films of the horror genre also portray Malay superstitious behavior through scenes that depict the characters consulting shamans and resorting to black magic to solve worldly problems, which are forbidden in Islam. However, despite the films' critique of the Malays, they did not raise the controversy that '*Lelaki Harapan Dunia*' did, which leads many to postulate that it was the director's ethnic Chinese background that has heightened Malay hypersensitivity towards the film. This belief was cemented during the 27th Malaysian Film Festival when Liew delivered his appreciation speech in English upon receiving the award on stage, only to be taunted by the Malay-majority audience who demanded that he spoke in Malay instead, to which he acceded but with palpable struggle.

The aforementioned example shows that the ethnic paradigm still dominates the national imaginary of the Malaysian public. Controversies arising from films that are produced by non-Malay directors or that feature non-Malay characters have often received intense public scrutiny. In 2006, the late Yasmin Ahmad's inter-ethnic film, '*Sepet*' ('Slit-eyed') (2004), which features the romantic relationship between a Malay girl, Orked and a Chinese boy, Jason, was lambasted on mainstream media. In a television forum '*Fenomena Seni'* (Arts Phenomena) ran by 'Radio Televisyen Malaysia 1' (RTM1) titled '*Sepet* and *Gubra*: Cultural Corruptors?' *('Sepet and Gubra: Pencemar Budaya?)*, an invited guest and an editor of the Malay-language daily '*Berita Harian*', Akmal Abdullah, expressed his intolerance of seeing Orked and Jason together on the grounds that it is incompatible that a person of high religious piety like Orked is dating a 'Chinese criminal' who sells illegal video discs. He added that '*Sepet*' fails to represent the lived experience of Malay-Muslims who abide by religious obligations (Khoo 2009a). Another invited guest, Raja Azmi Raja Sulaiman, a film producer and writer for the mainstream Malay cinema, was strongly against the inter-ethnic elements in '*Sepet'* as he claimed that they are incompatible with the rights and dominance of Malays in the country (Khoo 2009a).

Even after more than a decade has passed since the controversy surrounding Yasmin's films, a climate of hypersensitivity prevails among the general masses especially

when the filmic content and productions involve inter-ethnic themes and members of minority ethnic groups. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of Malaysia's pursuit of being a "cosmopolitan society of equal citizens" or "a people differentiated by class rather than race" (Milner et. al., 2014:11), in reality, Malaysians continue to be divided along ethnic lines. A case in point would be the ethnicised comment made by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak during the 2013 general election. Describing the voting behaviour of ethnic Chinese who supported the opposition parties in large numbers as a "Chinese tsunami", Najib acknowledged that the results have polarised parliament along ethno-religious lines (Farish Noor 2014).

Political events take place against the climate of rising inter-ethnic tensions in the lived environment as reported in mainstream media. One of the major incidents that took place against the backdrop of the '*Lelaki Harapan Dunia*' controversy is the riot that took place at Low Yat Plaza, which is located in the predominantly Chinese-populated area of Bukit Bintang in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. The incident involved a Malay man who reportedly shoplifted a smartphone from the mall's mobile shop on 11th July 2015. The police then arrested him, who later damaged the shop and assaulted its workers with his group of friends. What transpired thereafter on social media was disturbing ethnic overtones as rumours spread about how a Chinese trader at the mall had attempted to sell a counterfeit phone to the Malay man. A riot broke out at Low Yat the following day. Videos of a violent Malay mob attacking Chinese passers-by went viral on social media, with calls by netizens to boycott Low Yat and the "deceitful Chinese"- a sore reminder of the legitimating tool that Malays often use to paint themselves as victims of the more economically powerful Chinese in justifying their access to Malay privileges. Although the authorities have dismissed the incident as one that was ethnically motivated (AsiaOne 2015), the ensuing events highlighted the deep entrenchment of the ethnic paradigm in the minds of the average Malaysian. These examples demonstrate that although social events may not have a direct co-relation with films, films should never be discussed in their own terms but rather, in relation to the prevailing social climate and attitude of the time.

This dissertation offers a critical analysis of how Malaysian undergraduates interpret representations of inter-ethnic relations in selected films produced in Malaysia. At this juncture, it is worth inquiring the terms 'race', 'ethnicity' and 'inter-ethnic'. I do

not seek to provide detailed definitions of these terms, as they have been problematised elsewhere by other academics (Hirschman 1987; Downing and Husband 2005; Kivisto and Croll 2012; Spencer 2014). Instead, I will differentiate these concepts as they are to be used in sociology, as well as this dissertation. In sociology, 'race' is a concept used to define groups of people based on biological traits deemed by society to be socially significant as social identity boundaries. This notion came about during the expansion of British colonialism in Malaya in the late 19th century. Direct colonial rule witnessed the application of European evolutionary theory to the colonised societies, which justified a social and economic order structured by 'race'. As a result, the meaning of 'race' evolved from a relatively general term that differentiated peoples on almost any criteria to a narrower classification of biologically defined sub-species, which contained specific assumptions about inherent cultural dispositions of different groups of people. The rhetoric of 'race relations' in Peninsular Malaysia, as well as the stereotypes linked to the various ethnic communities in present-day Malaysia, is largely a product of the colonial experience (Hirschman 1986). As the aforementioned paragraphs have shown, the 'racial' paradigm continues to be employed in both political and public realms in Malaysia. By this, I refer to the way in which the rigid categories of 'Malays', 'Chinese' and 'Indians' are perpetuated by the state through their policies, as well as the social consciousness of the peoples.

In recognising the issues and limitations of the biological basis of ethnic differences, scholars have replaced the term 'race' with 'ethnicity'. However, the mere substitution of 'race' with 'ethnicity' does not necessarily contribute to a more theoretically informed perspective of the ethnic phenomenon. In fact, as Shamsul (1998) argues, this replacement still runs the risk of pigeonholing the various ethnicities into essentialised categories that are symptomatic of plural societies. Nonetheless, for the purpose of my research, I will largely employ this term in describing the major ethnic communities in Malaysia, and 'inter-ethnic' when explicating their relations. I refer the term 'ethnic' to shared cultural practices, perspectives and other distinctions that set one group of people apart from another. In so doing, I do not intend to reiterate the conceptual fallacies of 'race' nor reiterate the critiques of 'race' or 'ethnicity' as a marker of difference. Rather, in following Holst (2012), who argues that groupings of ethnic populations should be done in a

processual manner, I will be using 'ethnicity' in a way that neither downplays the prevailing role of 'ethnicity' in the country nor limits the inquiry to descriptions of socio-cultural realities that do not transcend notions of ethnicity. My choice of using the term 'inter-ethnic relations' rather than 'ethnic relations' is meant to accentuate this very reality that amidst scholarly attempts to disrupt essentialised categories of ethnicity, tensions *between* the major ethnicities are more pronounced than those *within* the same ethnicity. As such, in analysing how ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations are represented in films, this dissertation will discuss the ways in which actual film viewers from both the majority and minority ethnic groups negotiate their relations with each other.

The aim of this dissertation is not to provide an all-encompassing picture of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia given the limited space that it offers. Rather, what it seeks to contribute are constructions of these relations in films, and vignettes of how they are being lived out in the country through the narratives of its youth. Forming a third of the country's population based on the 2010 census, the views of young people, defined as those aged 15 to 29 (Saw 2015), bear salience on the future of multi-ethnicity in Malaysia. The dissertation focuses on the views of educated youth, specifically university students, as their presumed ability to think critically and form their own opinions will provide diverse nuances as to why they challenge, maintain or reinforce certain ethnic ideologies in the meaning-making process. I argue that an understanding of the ways in which inter-ethnic relations are represented in films are just as important as how they are being experienced in reality because the various ethnic communities do not exist merely on their own accounts but are actively and socially constructed through the mass media by competing parties, including filmmakers, the state and society. At times, films may foreground inter-ethnic relations that are happening in the real world. At other times, they may distort, challenge or overlook certain aspects of those relations.

Many scholars have theorised how films and social reality are mutually constitutive of each other. However, as Diken and Laustsen (2008) caution, social life can never be fully actualised on the screen. Instead, they argue for an examination of cinema and social life through a dialectical perspective, one that encourages a view of cinema beyond its role as a representation of society. Cinema to them should provoke a

critical and spiritual response from the audience. Sociologist Norman Denzin has also aptly articulated that: “Films are sites of resistance. They are places where meanings, politics, and identities are negotiated” (Denzin 2002:183). In view of these, a study on audience engagement with the ideological discourses in the films would offer insights into how the locals experience and articulate the meanings of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. The next section will offer further justifications for the choice of using films as a mode of research inquiry into the state of inter-ethnic relations in the country.

1.2 Films as an Analytical Tool to Study Inter-Ethnic Relations in Malaysia

The widespread appeal of films makes both films and the audience important sites for analysing the meanings of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. In the past few years, the number of audiences for local films has been increasing every year. During the period in which most of the films studied were produced, which is from 2005 to 2010, audience number increased from 3.74 million in 2005 to 9.24 million in 2010 (FINAS 2012). The local film industry generated RM27.24 million in box office revenue in 2004. The amount grossed to RM81.78 million in 2010. The rising trends are an indication of the progress made by the Malaysian film industry. In the year 2016 alone, the local film industry witnessed a total of 46 films being produced (FINAS 2016).

In addition to visiting theatres, more Malaysians, especially youngsters are watching films online. In this age of digitisation, there has also been a proliferation of films uploaded on online sites, such as YouTube, EngageMedia and Vimeo, by youth activists (Lim 2013, 2014). These video-sharing websites act as spaces where critical and taboo social issues are raised, which range from ethnic prejudices to non-heterosexual relationships. Thus, the popularity of films as a source of entertainment and cultural expression implies that they have a wider reach of audience than other discursive forms of media. It also affirms Baumann’s (2007) assertion that film has become a legitimate form of art, not simply a popular pastime.

Another rationale for choosing films as a unit of analysis is because the culture of watching and reviewing films has proven to be a prominent platform for public debate on ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations worldwide (Denzin 2002; Hughey 2010; Sim 2014). Studies from fields as diverse as sociology, cultural studies and communication studies have demonstrated how films are able to engage audiences, particularly youth, in critical discussions with one another about the ideologies contained in them (Tipton and Tiemann 1993; Banaji 2006; Fisher 2006). As hooks (1996:2) argues, "Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audience can dialogue about these charged issues." In view of these, studying young people's consumption of films would enable discourses on the politics of films and film audiences to be critically assessed, maintained and/or challenged. Otherwise, disengagement with real audiences would run the risk of scholars making simplistic and untested assumptions about the links between filmic representations and popular responses towards the films.

1.3 Malaysia as a Geographical Focus: A Timely Case Study on Malaysian Undergraduates' Engagement with Inter-Ethnic Relations in Local Films

1.3.1 Malaysian Films as a Unit of Analysis

This dissertation analyses a range of mainstream and non-mainstream films in order to explore the various ideological discourses and representations of inter-ethnic relations on the screen. While mainstream films dominate the local film industry, ambiguous regulations on filmmaking censorship in Malaysia allows for the coexistence of alternative forms of filmmaking that fulfil the divergent interests of Malaysian society. The lack of clear guidelines on filmmaking censorship enables some filmmakers to push the boundaries of censorship by experimenting with various narratives about issues deemed sensitive by the government. Such narratives are manifested in the form of independent filmmaking, which has challenged the hegemony of mainstream cinema that are dominated by Malay-language films, that feature predominantly Malay cast, and that cater to the socio-cultural and Islamic expectations of the mainstream Malay movie audience (Weintraub 2011). The support offered by 'Pusat Komas', a human rights organisation in Malaysia known for

organising the 'FreedomFilmFest' (FFF), also encourages the production of independent films, or 'indie' for short. FFF is an annual film festival that acts as platforms for independent filmmakers and activists to showcase their films and engage in public discussions about them during film screenings held in several key cities in Malaysia.

Additionally, the film production and consumption trends in Malaysia stand in contrast to other countries in Asia, particularly Singapore where the Media Development Authority (MDA) has established clear guidelines that restrict any media content that may threaten ethnic and religious harmony in the country (IMDA 2017). This can be explained by how the government has deemed ethnic and religious issues that could "destabilise" public order as "Out of Bounds", or more commonly known as "OB" markers, to refer to the limits of political discussion (Velayutham 2007:110-111). As such, such strict regulations have resulted in the absence of films about ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations both in the mainstream as well as alternative realms. Even where the films feature some form of ethnic representations, they either depict the harmonious co-existence of the three main ethnicities of Chinese, Malays and Indians in Singapore, or end up simplifying the ethnic and cultural traits of minority groups (Tan 2004). Thus, this has foreclosed any attempts for ethnic and religious issues to be discussed altogether through media platforms.

Such controls of the film industry are also rampant in other Southeast Asian countries where filmic depictions of ethnic minority groups do not represent the everyday lived realities of those communities. For example, in Burma, as part of the government's attempt to secure national solidarity, ethnic minorities like the Shan have been constructed in films from the 1960s as the exotic 'other' in relation to the Burman majority. As Ferguson (2012) argues, these formative cinematic othering of the minorities in which the Shan are portrayed as 'simpler' and 'cooler' than their Burman counterparts continue to frame the contemporary Burmese view of the Shan. Regrettably, the lack of alternative representations of the Shan in Burmese films occludes viewers' awareness of the harsh conditions under which people in the Shan state live today.

Unlike these countries, the existence of alternative media platforms enable sanitised representations of society to be challenged in Malaysia. In fact, the burgeoning of new media platforms and the advent of digital video technology have witnessed the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers who are actively appropriating social media to broach themes that are considered taboo in the country, including inter-ethnic relations. These filmmakers, or what Lim (2014) terms as 'v-loggers' make use of online platforms, such as 'EngageMedia', '15 Malaysia' and 'PopTeeVee' to upload and disseminate their works. Thus, with social media acting as an alternative platform for public discourse in Malaysia, and with research showing that an increasing number of Malaysian youth are appropriating new media technologies in their lives (Samsudin and Latiffah 2000; Pam Nilan 2012; Lim 2013; Lim 2014), the ways in which young people articulate their views on ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations through these platforms should not be ignored.

1.3.2 Malaysian Youth Engagement with Films

Before justifying the choice of studying undergraduates, it is necessary to first problematise the notion of 'youth' in this dissertation. Following Wyn and White (1997), this research views 'youth' as a relational concept rather than a categorical one. While the former refers to "the social processes whereby age is socially constructed, institutionalised and controlled in historically and culturally specific ways", the latter approaches the study of youth primarily in terms of age groupings (Wyn and White 1997: 4-5). Youth is a relational concept because its meaning is constructed vis-à-vis the concept of adulthood, which is the anticipated 'arrival' of the process of becoming youth. Understanding 'youth' as such also brings power relations to the forefront of analysis. As Wyn and White (1997) contend, although young people have 'rights' as citizens, these are easily denied. They do not have complete say in the institutions in which they have the most at stake, including education. Furthermore, viewing 'youth' as a relational concept is more dynamic, as it highlights how social structures and varying social circumstances differentiate the lives of young people even though they may share commonalities in age. Additionally, it sheds light on how youth negotiate the impact of institutions and of changing economic and political circumstances on their lives as they grow up. Hence, in view of my interest in studying how youth negotiate the impacts of state-driven

Islamisation projects and prevailing ethnic climate on their multi-ethnic experience, the notion of 'youth' as a relational concept is more relevant to this dissertation.

This dissertation focuses on Malaysian undergraduates in consideration of the role of the university environment in increasing their consciousness about ethnicity and ethnic identities. Scholarly works on ethnicity and racism in universities from all around the world have reiterated the importance of universities as spaces that shape and reconstruct students' ethnic identities as they expose them to courses, organisations and spokespersons that politicise and problematise ethnicity (Fox 2009; Wilkins 2012; Vaccaro 2017). Research on the political mobilisation of youth in Southeast Asia has also shown that the university environment is a crucible for larger political debates and for the stimulation of students' consciousness of emergent political and ideological ideas (Weiss 2011). In developing states where the government tolerates some degree of opposition, students play an important role in influencing the political dynamics of the country (Altbach 1987). History has proven that this notion of university students as generators of political change is popular elsewhere in the region and throughout the world. This is especially so in countries like Thailand and the Philippines where the mobilisation of students on campuses have led to popular student uprisings, as evident from the 14 October 1973 students' protest against the military regime in Bangkok and the 'unfinished revolution' in classrooms in the Philippines from the 1950s to 1980s (Kasetsiri 1993; Ileto 1998).

Malaysia is no exception to this, as the history of youth activism in the country has demonstrated that influential civil society movements have been formed out of major tertiary student organisations (Liow 2009). The Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement or *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM), arguably the largest and most organised civil society movement in Malaysia, was established in August 1971. Spearheaded by a popular Islamic youth activist and founder of the existing opposition political party, *Parti Keadlian Rakyat* (PKR), Anwar Ibrahim, ABIM was formed around student bodies like the *Persatuan Bahasa Melayu Universiti Malaya* (University of Malaya Malay Language Society) and *Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar-Pelajar Islam Malaysia* (National Union of Malaysian Muslim Students). Apart from the charismatic leadership of Anwar, ABIM managed to garner popular public support

given its urban base and ability to reconcile a vision of Islamic society grounded on strict interpretations of the Quran and hadith with a form of modernity that emphasise scientific and technological progress (Liow 2009). ABIM gained an even greater significant political credibility after organising a mass protest against peasant suffering in the district of Baling, which ended up in the arrest of more than 1200 students. Estimates suggest that ABIM had managed to mobilise about 90% of students from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and 60% of students from the University of Malaya (Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010). Hence, this proves the important role of undergraduates as spokespersons for the Malaysian public.

However, increasingly, the harsh regulations of the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA), or *Akta Universiti dan Kolej Universiti* (AUKU) have prevented many students from engaging in critical discourse and large-scale protests across society (Weiss 2011). The UUCA, which was enacted in 1971 following the May 1969 Race Riots, prohibited university students from engaging in any form of social or political activism on and off campus. Students who are found to express support for any political party or trade union are liable to monetary fines or imprisonment, or both (AUKU, Part III, Clause 15[5]). This is demonstrated by the aftermath of the massive oppositional mobilisation campaign that ensued following the detention of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. The campaign, which witnessed the cross-ethnic alliances of thousands of students from 10 student organisations that rallied behind him, culminated into what was known as the Malaysian *reformasi* (reform) movement (Weiss 2011). As a result of their participation in pro-Anwar assemblies, two students were charged and expelled from the university. Since then, large-scale student protests did not take place until the year 2001. On 8th June 2001, about 400 students gathered at the National Mosque for a peaceful but unauthorised demonstration against the Internal Security Act (ISA). Riot police beat several students, and arrested seven of them from four universities (Weiss 2011). Despite the crackdown and regular arrests, the year 2004 alone saw over 40 students charged under UUCA (Weiss 2011).

Although the current policy of intellectual containment has stifled students' impetus to participate in student movements, local university campuses remain hotbeds of political contestations. PAS and UMNO's proxy organisations remain active on every

Malaysian campus, operating in the form of 'independent' student organisations approved by the university (Muller 2014). Moreover, the spirit of student activism still lives on, albeit in a lesser degree and form. For instance, on 10th September 2014, over 500 students and lecturers from University of Malaya staged a protest at the campus in support of University of Malaya law lecturer, Dr. Azmi Sharom. Dr. Azmi, who is also a columnist for *The Star*, was charged under the Sedition Act 1948 over comments expressed on an online portal regarding the 2009 Perak crisis (Lim 2014). The protest, which was organised by Universiti Malaya Students' Association (PMUM) and Universiti Malaya Academic Staff Association (PKAUM), demanded among other things academic freedom, the freedom of speech, the abolishment of the Sedition Act, and the repeal of charges against Dr. Azmi. Likewise, student activists have also participated in the '*Bersih*' protests in Kuala Lumpur that called for Prime Minister Najib Razak to step down following allegations of corruption and financial mismanagement involving state investor 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). (Rozanna and Menon 2016). Even though none of my research informants claimed to have pledged allegiance to any activist organisation, there are several of them who have taken part in peaceful demonstrations off campus. At the time I was conducting fieldwork in Malaysia, the demonstration that some informants from Unitar International University participated in was the protest against the increase in Goods and Services Tax (GST) in Kelana Jaya, a neighbourhood in Petaling Jaya. Thus, Weiss's (2011) claim that youth of the current generation are more leery and prone to eschew any political role is open to contestation.

Another rationale for studying undergraduates is to examine the degree to which the dynamics of their experience with inter-ethnic relations have evolved over time from their childhood to adolescence. Research on the Malaysian educational system often cite factors like parental influence in enrolment choices, and the residential segregation of the various ethnic groups in accounting for the low level of inter-ethnic mingling among students since primary school (Tan and Santhiram 2014). However, as Holst (2012) argues, inter-ethnic interactions become relatively effortless at the tertiary level, as ethnicised boundaries exist to a much lesser degree than in the primary and secondary school systems. Located at the interstices of teenagehood and adulthood, the undergraduates' experience would demonstrate how young adults

meet, work and live together in less ethnically segregated spaces. Yet, reports on inter-ethnic mingling on campus do not paint a positive picture. For instance, a 2002 study of UM undergraduates shows that the rate of inter-ethnic relations on campus is worse than that of the country overall (Weiss 2011). It also highlights that students tend to socialise only with members of the same ethnic groups (Weiss 2011). As my respondents' profiles will reveal later on, many of them come from diverse educational backgrounds prior to entering college. This diversity stems from enrolment in rural and urban schools, as well as public and private institutions. Given this diverse profile, it would be interesting to note whether or not their educational history would have any influence on their current attitudes towards inter-ethnic relations.

Moreover, as the Malaysian government continues to fund programmes and own most of the assets of higher learning institutes, especially public universities (Lee 2015), these institutes will continue to operate as an instrument of state ideology. The persistence of bureaucratization of the higher education system occurs in tandem with growing manifestations of ethnicisation in Malaysia's education system, in which such policies as the ethnic quota system for university admission are still in place in spite of their abolishment many years ago. The ethnic quota system was introduced in the education system in line with the New Economic Policy (NEP). From the 1970s onwards, the admission criteria was primarily based on a person's ethnicity. When it was introduced, the target share of *Bumiputera* students, which refer to local Malays and other indigenous peoples, was set at 75 per cent, which is more than the *Bumiputera* share of the population according to ethnicity (Holst 2012). This figure mirrors closely the ratio of scholarships awarded to Malay students at that time. Courses in higher demand, such as medicine or law, were difficult to get into for non-Malays. Although the quota system was officially abolished in 2002 in favour of an admission based on merit, what exactly constitutes merit is unclear. As such, an uneven playing field in the access to tertiary education, and remnants of polarisation along ethnic lines continue to pervade the education system.

Racist attitudes among school authorities, as well as biased school curricula have at times, aggravated matters. For example, in 2006, a textbook written and introduced by two lecturers at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) for a compulsory course on ethnic

relations regarded the Chinese calls for need-based affirmative action policies as extreme, condemned Indian youth for the 2001 ethnic clashes in Kampung Medan on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, and blamed the predominantly non-Malay Democratic Action Party (DAP) opposition party for the May 1969 riots (Weiss 2011). Essentially, the book offered a selective view of history and only served to reify ideas of Malay supremacy. Although it was eventually withdrawn, it caused uproar among some members of the public. Thus, exploring the ways in which the undergraduates negotiate their relations with the school authorities and different forms of ethnicised manifestations amidst suppressions of student activism makes them a rewarding case study.

1.3.3 Audience Reception in an Era of Heigthened Islamisation

Many scholars who have engaged in research on audience reception have argued for the importance of attending to social context in examining viewers' engagement with films (Staiger 1992; Banaji 2006; Fisher 2006; Reinhard and Olson 2016). However, few have highlighted the degree of specificity to which social contexts should be defined in view of the dynamic nature in which audience filmic interpretation may vary with changing social contexts. As Culler (1981:13) aptly articulates, "It is not interpreting works [per se] that matters, but an attempt to understand their changing intelligibility by identifying the codes and interpretive assumptions that give them meaning for different audiences at different periods." In view of this, I have contextualised my research within the current phase of increasing state-driven institutionalisation of Islamisation in Malaysia to focus on how contemporary audiences articulate their multi-ethnic experience. Although the forces and strands of Islamisation are diverse, it is the impacts of state-driven projects that form the focus of my inquiry.

In this dissertation, I adopt Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas's (2010:137) definition of Islamisation, which they refer to as "the intensification of Islamic influence on social, cultural, economic and political relations". The role of Islam has become even more important in Malaysia's modernisation process. This is brought about by the state's attempt to introduce a kind of modernity for Malaysia that is alternative of Western

modernity (Bunnell 2004). The state has proclaimed that Western models of modernity should be filtered through local systems of Islam, Malay *adat*, or customs, traditions and behavioural codes, and Asian values (Md Azalanshah 2013). Thus, contrary to the Western notion of modernity as a phenomenon that is antithetical to tradition, tradition is valorised as a bulwark against threats of 'Western modernity' in the Malaysian context. As the moral compass of Malaysian modernity, Islam and *adat* offer a framework for guiding the mundane aspects of Malay cultural life. Given the conflation of Islam and modernity, and how Islamic resurgence aims to bring Islamic practices under closer government control and scrutiny, it can be argued that the Islamic modernism forwarded by the state occurs in tandem with Islamisation as a broader political force.

Before justifying the context of my research, I shall first provide a brief historical overview of how Islam has entered the public and political discourses in Malaysia. As posited above, state-sponsored Islamisation in Malaysia is not a new phenomenon. It has been a feature of Malaysia's socio-political discourse since the 1980s. The process was only accelerated due to the intensification of political rivalry between the two largest Malay-Muslim political parties in the country- the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) from the late 80s to the 90s. These parties have been capitalising on Islam as a tool to garner support from the Malay-Muslim majority in the elections of 1986, 1990, 1995 and 1999 by claiming that they are the true defenders of Islam (Farish Noor 2014). Throughout the eras served by former Prime Ministers Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003) and Abdullah Badawi (2003-2009), Islam was institutionalised in nearly all spheres of Malaysian public life. The macro and micro-management of the ordinary Malaysians' lives impacted not only Muslims, but non-Muslims as well, as they too are subjected to the same regulations imposed by the authorities.

During Badawi's tenure, he introduced the concept of '*Islam Hadari*' (Civilizational Islam) that sought to cultivate a 'progressive' outlook among ordinary Muslims and the government that are consistent with the Islamic creed (Mohd Azizuddin 2010). However, despite its laudable intentions, *Islam Hadari* was criticised for not representing the agenda of all ethnic communities in Malaysia. Although the concept was assumed to be universal, the non-Malays saw it as an attempt to Islamise all

Malaysian citizens, and one that was biased towards the Malays (Mohd Azizuddin 2010). In essence, *Islam Hadari* did not resonate well with the wider public.

After Badawi stepped down in 2009, his successor, the current Prime Minister of Malaysia Najib Tun Razak introduced a public campaign that he named '1 Malaysia' project. Despite being couched in a nation-building discourse that ostensibly aims to deconstruct ethnic boundaries by bringing together Malaysians of all ethnic and religious backgrounds in the spirit of a single nation, the society continues to be segregated along ethnic lines. This is largely attributed to the slew of worldwide trends and events leading up to the May 2013 elections. Prior to the elections, the Najib administration was already facing tremendous pressure from Malay ethno-nationalist groups who felt threatened by the government's economic liberalisation programmes following rapid globalisation. Many of these groups expressed concerns that the economic reform, which involved giving concessions to non-Malays, would end Malay dominance in the country. These groups became even more fervent in their defence of the position of Malays in Malaysia following the dismal 2013 election results, which saw many Malaysian Chinese voting for the opposition despite the foregrounding of non-religious signifiers by Najib's political party, the Barisan Nasional (BN). Describing the Chinese voting behaviour as a "Chinese tsunami", Najib acknowledged the ethnic polarisation that prevails in the country. Following the election, the mainstream press were quick to condemn the ethnic Chinese and call into question the loyalty of non-Malays in the country. It is against this background of a segregated society that Islam returns to the core of Malaysian politics (Farish Noor 2014).

Notwithstanding the influence of political developments upon the intensification of Islamisation of the country, scholars have argued that societal factors too have contributed to Islamisation processes, which produce results that self-reinforce the effects of Islamisation (Abott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010). The state's Islamisation programme has indeed resulted in some 'unintended' consequences of the modernisation of goods and services offered in the name of Islam. A case in point is the modernisation of Islamic banking system, which has witnessed Malaysia turning into a hub for Islamic-style financial services following the launch of an Islamic capital market. Hence, the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia is

characterised not just by the Islamisation of modernity, but the modernisation of Islam as well.

Apart from the banking sector, another domain in which the impacts of Islamisation are felt most acutely is the educational sector (Abott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010). As noted earlier, Islamisation processes do not just affect the lives of Muslims, but of non-Muslims as well. As Barr and Govindasamy (2010) posit in their analysis of the developments in the education system as an aspect of Malaysia's Islamisation programme, particularly within the secondary school history curriculum, educational reforms signify a systematic attempt to reinforce the role of Malays in the country's nation-building project while at the same time conditioning non-Malays and non-Muslims to contribute to this project from the margins as subordinate partners. Though contextualised during the Islamisation phase of Badawi's tenure, the intensification of Islamic religious nationalism as an instrument for Malay nationalism persist until today through various educational policies (Holst 2012). Building on the works of such scholars as Nge (2010), Holst (2012) and Vellymalay (2017), among others, this dissertation will explore the effects of ethnicised education policies on daily student life and interaction. In her study of how university students of various backgrounds discuss such issues as ethnic stereotyping, discrimination and quota systems during a two-day workshop organised by All Women's Action Society Malaysia (AWAM), Nge (2010) contends that an open and honest dialogue among young people can help to foster positive inter-ethnic relations. As she astutely observes, "… young people [should be given] the opportunity to learn to become mature and willing participants in the democratic process of being active citizens… the first step is to give them the space to engage each other, across ethnic and gender lines, without exercising adult control" (Nge 2010: 232).

However, unlike previous studies, this dissertation will take the discussion one step further by employing films as a tool to examine the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations in contemporary Malaysia from the perspectives of the students. Scholars like Weintraub (2011), Daniels (2013) and Muller (2014) have demonstrated the key role of such forms of popular culture as films in Islamisation processes of Muslim-majority Malaysia and Indonesia. Indeed, since the 1990s, Islamic symbols and narratives have dominated the mass media in these countries, and function as sites for

reflecting on Muslim values and practices (Weintraub 2011). In the midst of the proliferation of Islamic popular culture, several local filmmakers have produced films that disrupt the hegemony of Islam in mainstream media by featuring how Islam can co-exist side-by-side with other religions, which instantly shed light on the taken-for-granted lives of minority ethnic communities that contribute to multi-ethnic living in the country. While scholars have conducted studies on how diverse Muslim audiences negotiate various representations of Islam in popular media (Daniels 2013; Dahlia 2014; Md Azalanshah and Runnel 2014; Lily et. al. 2016), there has been no research to date on how citizens of different ethnicities in multi-ethnic countries like Malaysia engage with inter-ethnic themes in films. I argue that in a country where state institutionalisation of Islamisation has also impacted non-Muslims, it is impossible to ignore their views on the extent to which Islamisation has affected their day-to-day relations with other ethnic groups.

1.4 Research Questions and Hypotheses

In this dissertation, I seek to explore how ethnicity as a social category is positioned across other social dimensions, particularly religion, social class and gender. I adopt this intersectional approach in order to illuminate the ways in which the structures of ethnicity, religion, class and gender are interweaved in the lives of the undergraduates, and the complications that arise from these intersections, while at the same time recognising that ethnicity continues to bear salience on societal relations in Malaysia. Thus, in a country where ethnicity still largely defines people's identities, Malaysia represents an excellent case study to interrogate the following research question: How, if at all, is ethnicity intertwined with religious, classed and gendered subjectivities in the undergraduates' interpretations of inter-ethnic themes in contemporary Malaysian films? Situated within the current context of increasing state-driven Islamisation projects in Malaysia, it also seeks to address: How do the undergraduates negotiate the structural impacts of Islamisation on their lived multi-ethnic experience?

In addressing these research questions, this study will propose several hypotheses:

1. The dominant way in which the undergraduates interpret Malaysian inter-ethnic films is by adopting an ethnicised perspective to the messages encoded in the films. By 'ethnicised', I am referring to a kind of subjectivity that attributes all social matters to ethnicity.
2. The respondents' narratives are an important resource for the analysis of intersectional identities. They not only offer a glimpse of their lived experience, but show how the youth assess, reinforce and challenge ethnic, class and gender identities.
3. The current context of Islamisation contributes significantly to the meanings that the undergraduates make out of local inter-ethnic films.
4. The undergraduates' articulation of ethnicised narratives are instructive for an analysis of the state of multi-ethnicity in the contemporary political order in Malaysia.

To test these hypotheses, I have employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The former involves an ethnographic study of Malaysian undergraduates' on-site interpretations of two inter-ethnic films following compulsory film screening sessions whereas the latter entails quantifying some of the responses one-by-one. Although only two films were shown to them, my discussions of inter-ethnic relations with them were not limited to these two films alone but extended to other locally produced films with similar themes as well. Based on the interview narratives and my own analysis of the films, I synthesised the findings and found that while the respondents' filmic interpretations bear resemblance to their everyday lives in many ways, there are moments where complexities and paradoxes emerged to disrupt this relationship, but that nonetheless highlight the social dynamics in which the films were produced and consumed.

1.5 Thesis Contributions

This dissertation makes important theoretical and empirical contributions to several areas of study, particularly sociology of films, inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia, as well as audience engagement with locally produced films through an intersectional perspective. First, it aims to bring films made in Malaysia to the fore of the literature on Asian cinema. Compared to films made in other Asian countries, Malaysian films

are largely understudied and underrepresented within the global cinematic literature. Research on films made in Malaysia only found spaces in books that are focused on films produced in Southeast Asia (Ciecko 2006; Yeoh and Lee 2011; Weintraub 2011; Baumgärtel 2012; Lim and Yamamoto 2012; McKay 2012; Daniels 2013). Southeast Asian films in general receive little attention in the global cinematic discourse. They are often discussed fleetingly under the rubric of Asian cinema. These include Ciecko's (2006) book titled 'Contemporary Asian Cinema', which dedicate six chapters to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines. As insightful as these chapters are, they are still categorised under the big banner of Asian cinema and ignore the distinct characteristics of individual Southeast Asian countries. Furthermore, whenever Asian cinema is concerned, it is Bollywood and East Asian films that often form the corpus of research. Examples include Stephen Teo's 2013 book titled 'The Asian Cinema Experience: Styles, Spaces and Theory' and Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Gary Needham's edited volume in 2006, 'Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide'. Despite being written as a guide to Asian cinema, it is films from India and South Korea that constitute a huge portion of Teo's discussion. Malaysia only receives a brief attention under a small section on horror films. Likewise, although intended as a reader to Asian cinema as the title suggests, Eleftheriostis and Needham's book completely ignores the Southeast Asian context and instead devotes chapters to films from India, Japan, Taiwan and other parts of Asia. Consequently, an oversight and lack of in-depth discussion of Southeast Asian cinema gloss over the complexities of the film industries and countries in the region. This dissertation thus argues for a more rigorous analysis of films made in Malaysia.

It also seeks to theorise the ways in which filmic narratives and ideologies are linked to the everyday lives of the audience. Although films can never be an accurate representation of social reality, no films can be entirely disengaged from the socio-cultural context that brings them into existence in the first place, and within which they are circulated and consumed (Ariel 2011). Thus, films play a significant role in engaging with various aspects of society. Yet, despite being a key social institution, its social dimensions have only been lightly explored. Existing empirical works that examine audience's engagement with films have not given much attention to the immediate social context of film viewing. These include Banaji's (2006) work that looks into young people's reception of Bollywood films. Despite being interested in

the cinema hall experience, her findings merely suggest that the audience respond to the films according to the experiences that they already acquired in real life. Likewise, despite conducting focus group discussions with 27 young participants aged 18 to 24 at a Southern university in the US to examine how they respond to the film 'Crash' (dir. Paul Haggis, 2005), Owen's (2009) data do not demonstrate how the participants engaged with one another's views (Owens 2009). Instead of dealing with audience analysis on the basis of the respondents' narratives, it paid more attention to the quantitative responses captured by the survey questionnaires, which is the other research method used by the author. Surveys are a problematic method for audience reception studies, as it confines the participants' responses to those formulated by researchers instead of allowing the former to offer their own ideas and interpretations.

As such, this study aims to fill this gap by developing a rigorous theorisation of films and everyday life. By treating meaning-making as a dynamic social process, it avoids the pitfall of using films as mere tools to garner the audience's responses based on their pre-existing beliefs and values. Studies of audience response to media texts have given close attention to individual audience's interpretation within specific social settings. While consideration is given to the immediate social contexts, meaning-making has been examined largely in terms of individual psychological process. This dissertation attempts to contribute to a rigorous discourse on sociology of films by extending the inquiry from how personal situations influence individual audience's engagement with the text to how meanings can be constructed and re-constructed in dialogue and negotiation with others. Thus, by attending to the significance of the discussion experience among the respondents in group settings, it interprets the role of the immediate social context as the dynamic interpersonal experience that shapes the meaning-making process. A comparison will be made between the inter-subjective responses of the research participants from focus group discussions and interviews with individual respondents to assess if the group settings have any influence on the interpretation of the films.

In view of this, I follow in the vein of Oleksy (2017) who places greater emphasis on the respondents' intersectional subjectivities than inherent social identities in the analysis of their interpretation of the films. The value of focusing on the former rather than the latter lies in the former's treatment of individuality as a process of becoming

and as a means by which cultural meanings are actively constructed, maintained and challenged. Far too much intersectional scholarship begins with the assumption that intersectionality is a finished framework that can be applied to a research project. However, as Oleksy eloquently explains, "intersectional subjectivities [must] remain in a constant tension of open dialogue and exchange. This means that the famous categories … of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, etc. must not capture us and fix us like a simple product of identitarian vectors, but should be strategically used to explain our own lived experience…" (Oleksy 2017:6). In other words, researchers should approach the field inductively, let the participants speak for themselves and explore how they make sense of their social identities based on their individual and group subjectivities.

This dissertation adopts intersectionality as a theoretical framework in its quest to examine how various intersectional subjectivities play out in the respondents' narratives. The concept of intersectionality was first coined by legal theorist Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 and later popularised by Patricia Hill Collins. Introduced during Crenshaw's discussion of the issues of black women's employment in the United States, it seeks to denote the "various ways in which [social forces] interact to shape the multiple dimensions of experience" (Crenshaw 1995:358). Intersectionality came about when black feminist activists sought to expand the conceptualisation of women's issues beyond the confines of sexism and gender discrimination. While white middle class women also faced gender discrimination, they were privileged in terms of ethnic and class backgrounds. In the pursuit of gender equality, policy initiatives often overlooked other systems of oppression beyond gender injustice and ignored the plight of poor Black women who experienced different types of exploitation simultaneously. Thus, instead of segmenting systems of oppression into such essentialised categories as "feminist issues", black feminists argued for new categories of analysis that treat the categories of race, class and gender as "distinctive yet interlocking structures of oppression" (Collins 2013:214).

Since then, intersectional analyses of social divisions have come to occupy central spaces in sociological, feminist and other legal and political discourses of international human rights. This section will not review past works on intersectionality but instead, elucidate how it bears important implications on the

future of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. Despite the corpus of literature on intersectionality as a concept, theory and methodology, little has been written on how interconnections of different social identities intersect in the context of everyday lives in multi-ethnic cities in Southeast Asia. Likewise, despite the burgeoning international scholarship on intersectionality, no academic works within the Malaysian context has specifically employed this framework in their studies in spite of the recognition that it is a country that is marked by class, gender and other forms of inequalities. As such, beyond treating intersectionality as a critical *inquiry* that is largely concerned with issues pertaining to existing bodies of knowledge, grand theories and methodologies, this dissertation responds to the call of intersectional scholars like Collins and Bilge (2016) to attend to intersectionality as a form of critical *praxis* as well, which they refer to as "the ways in which people, either as individuals or as part of groups, produce, draw upon or use intersectional frameworks in their daily lives" (Collins and Bilge 2016:32).

Proceeding from theory to practice, this dissertation offers a novel approach to empirical investigation of media consumption by showing how films act as sites where notions of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations are negotiated in relation to the everyday lived experience of a culturally diverse audience. By adopting a wide-scale ethnographic study of how Malaysian undergraduates articulate their views on inter-ethnic relations as portrayed in films, this research offers insights into the current state of multi-ethnicity in Malaysia from a bottom-up perspective. It also attends to their narratives in exploring how their intersectional subjectivities maintain, reinforce and contest the meanings of inter-ethnic relations imposed by the filmmakers and the state. Filmic images often appropriate ideologies about ethnicity, religion, class and gender to reinforce and justify macro-level hierarchies among ethnic groups. These images usually serve to cement ethnic stereotypes on classed and gendered communities. However, social actors negotiate these images to construct and reconstruct the meanings of inter-ethnic relations on an everyday level based on their intersectional subjectivities. As scholars of intersectionality argue, "the best intersectional framework utilises intersectonality as an analytic framework that starts from this assumption about structure, power, multiplicity, and then operationalizes it as a methodological principle for taking multiple interactive processes into account" (Luft 2009:102).

However, unlike Collins and Bilge (2016) who argue that intersectionality as a critical praxis should explicitly challenge the status quo and transform abusive power relations, I hesitate to launch my research from this standpoint. Their objectives are problematic as they assume that the disenfranchised would necessarily clamour for empowerment and put up a resistance to authority. Focusing only on the intersections of identities deemed marginalised or privileged ignores the complex and multiple experiences that may be shaped by a combination of oppression and privilege within individuals or groups. In view of this, this dissertation seeks to develop a fully intersectional analysis of the narratives by examining how the different social categories are mutually constitutive of one another to create different experiences and not treating one category as more salient than another. It will demonstrate how the social dimensions of ethnicity, religion, class and gender intersect during situated interactions while concurrently being shaped by structural forces.

1.6 Thesis Overview

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters to chart the theoretical and empirical contours of my arguments. This chapter, Chapter 1, highlights my research objectives and contextualises the study within the current phase of Islamisation in Malaysia. The theoretical abstractions identified in this chapter will form the basis for the conceptual framing adopted in the dissertation, which aims to theorise the ways in which the undergraduates negotiate Islamisation processes based on their intersectional subjectivities. The next chapter, Chapter 2, will review various sociological approaches to studying films. It provides a critical evaluation of existing scholarly works on audience reception of inter-ethnic themes in films from both the global as well as Malaysian contexts. In this chapter, I will also situate my research in the field of intersectional theory and explain its relevance as a theoretical framework of my study.

In Chapter 3, I will offer a methodological note of my study and a reflection on issues concerning research ethics and positionality. The following three chapters, Chapter 4 to 6, will discuss the empirical findings from my research and address the two main research questions that I have laid out earlier. Specifically, I draw on the findings of

my ethnographic research carried out at two tertiary institutions in Malaysia. Through an inductive approach, each chapter aims to examine how the interdependencies of such social dimensions as religious or non-religious affiliations, social class and gender orientations can be better explored through an analysis of the respondents' engagement with the films. The chapters will also explicate how an intersectional analysis of various social identities enriches our understanding of the ways in which they negotiate the influence of Islamisation on their lived experience. In the final chapter, Chapter 7, I will offer my evaluation of the nuances that emerge from the interstices between the different social categories, and critically reflect on how the undergraduates' attitudes towards ethnicity will shed light on the future of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews selected works on sociological approaches to studying films and highlights the gaps in the extant literature. It probes the dearth of discussions on inter-ethnic relations within the literature on intersectionality, and attempts to address this absence by bringing intersectionality studies into conversation with another important field within cultural studies: audience research. Although literatures on inter-ethnic relations, intersectionality and media reception have garnered a great deal of scholarly attention, these bodies of works are seldom studied together. As such, this dissertation argues for a more rigorous interrogation of how films may be able to mobilise discourses on inter-ethnic relations based on an intersectional analysis of how the audience articulate their lived experience in relation to the films. The chapter will first provide a brief overview of major sociological approaches to studying films (Section 2.2). Then, it will review existing works on audience research, particularly audience reception of cinematic ethnic relations (Section 2.3) before evaluating more recent scholarship that adopt intersectionality in their framework (Section 2.4). Following that, it will discuss the usefulness and relevance of intersectionality as a theoretical framework for this research and explain how the intersectional paradigm will fill gaps in the current literature (Section 2.5). In so doing, it contends that foregrounding the narratives of a multi-ethnic audience not only serves as important sources for uncovering their complex lived experiences, but highlights how intersectional identities and subjectivities are constructed and re-constructed through interaction among social subjects. Overall, it seeks to advance the theorisation of intersectionality within Sociology by attending to the ways power and structural inequalities operate in and through discursive spaces to systematically (re)produce particular inequalities and influence processes of subject formation.

2.2 Literature Review of Sociological Approaches to Studying Films

2.2.1 Overview of Works on Sociology of Films

The possibilities of relating sociology and film are wide. According to Lovell (1971), film may be related to sociology either through social phenomena or sociological knowledge. The former generally refers to relations between the film and the wider social system within which it occurs, that is, Sociology *through* film, whereas the latter is broadly conceived as studies that concentrate on the internal relations and development of film from a sociological point of view, which is Sociology *of* film (Lovell 1971). Much scholarship on sociological approaches to studying the film has been focused on the former rather than the latter, which tends to cover technical aspects of filmmaking, film production and distribution, as well as film content and form. This is due to the former's closer relation to dominant themes in Sociology as a discipline, such as social identities and institutions, and its ability to provide access and understanding to a multitude of socio-historical contexts within which a particular film is produced (Feltey and Sutherland 2010).

Early sociological studies of films can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s in the US. A private foundation called Payne Fund pioneered a series of research between 1929 and 1932, which aimed to explore the impacts of movies on children and young people (Tudor 1974).[1] Much like the Payne Fund Studies, the works that followed are also grounded in positivist assumptions about cause and effect. Since then, scholarly attempts to study films through a sociological lens have been sporadic over the past four decades or so. Apart from the works of Turner (1988), Jarvie (1970), Lovell (1971) and Tudor's (1974), which form early studies on sociological inquiries of films, few recent studies seek to offer a direct and sustained engagement between film and sociology. Although there have been some research on sociology of film in recent years (Diken and Laustsen 2008; Feltey and Sutherland 2010), they have primarily taken the form of case study films in individual articles and book chapters rather than full-length treatments of the two major fields.

Of more contemporary work that attempts to engage with the field of sociology of film is Diken and Laustsen's (2008) book titled '*Sociology Through the Projector*'. In

[1] The Payne Fund Studies were a series of research conducted between 1929 and 1932 that were financed by a private foundation called the Payne Fund. They represent the first attempt to study the effects of media on young people (Tudor 1974).

this book, the authors seek to demonstrate how social theory can be used to examine films, how films can introduce such sociological concepts as gender, identity and resistance to the audience, and how films can act as tools for "social diagnosis" (Diken and Laustsen 2008:14). While the study offers a nuanced approach of conceptualising the relationship between cinema and social reality by proposing a dialectical perspective between the two, it still falls short of a theoretically grounded analysis of films. Although they have engaged with the works of Marx, Foucault and Althusser, a major part of their research relies heavily on the psychoanalytic traditions of Freud, Lacan and Zizek. As a result, more attention is placed on the internal struggles of characters in case study films like 'Fight Club', 'Hamam' and 'Lord of the Flies' than how structural conditions, such as the capitalist system, influence their struggles. A thorough engagement with the works of sociologists like Marx would have helped to develop their analysis. Even if they are more concerned with advancing a micro-level analysis than a macro-level one, they have overlooked the works of major theorists working in the symbolic interactionist tradition in their analyses of the films. To ignore the studies of major theorists like Cooley or Mead in the examination of the aforementioned films is a major oversight especially since the authors deal with issues of the self and identity in their discussion of the films, all of which form the core of symbolic interactionism.

In addition, few existing publications that adopt a sociological perspective have engaged directly with actual social subjects. Many works are still confined to textual studies on images and ideologies represented in films. These include Norman Denzin's '*Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence*', in which he examines Hollywood's cinematic treatment of African, Asian, Hispanic and Native Americans (Denzin 2002), Dudrah's '*Bollywood: Sociology Goes to the Movies*', which analyses films as popular cultural texts and the dynamics of the cinema as a global industry, as well as Feltey and Sutherland's '*Cinematic Sociology: Social Life in Films*', which interrogates the representations of American society in Hollywood films (Dudrah 2006; Feltey and Sutherland 2010). While all of these works situate the study of cinema in relation to cultural and sociological inquiries that highlight the role and nature of the cinema as part of broader socio-cultural processes, they do not involve direct engagement with the audience. Without examining the manifestations of filmic discourses and representations on the audience's everyday lives, and the

possible ways in which the audience may appropriate these narratives, the practical value of these works remain confined to the realm of scholarly discourse. Hence, I argue that a sustained sociological study of films needs to engage with the audience's perspectives in order to validate the extent to which available social discourses and contexts inform their interpretive strategies.

Even those that conduct empirical studies of the audience are second-hand accounts of the audience's perspectives in that the narratives do not come from the audience themselves but rather, the interpretation of the researcher. These include researchers like Staiger (1992) and Hughey (2010) who despite being interested in the relationship between films and the audience, have not had first-hand experience with the audience. What constitute their findings are textual analyses of existing secondary data, such as published film reviews, reported surveys and fan commentaries. Without direct interaction with the audience, such works run the risk of being merely speculative. Although a rigorous sociological study of films should not be exclusively analysing the audience's perspectives alone, conducting empirical studies with the audience to test theories on film spectatorship would help to clarify any untested assumptions about the relationship between filmic images and popular responses towards the films. It would also help to illuminate how the audience make meanings out of the films.

Of major sociological work that has examined the relationship between films and the audience is Pierre Bourdieu's groundbreaking study titled '*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*' (Bourdieu 1984). Basing his study on large-scale surveys on more than 1200 French bourgeoisie from a range of occupations, Bourdieu sets out to explore their cultural preferences towards the choice of clothing, leisure activities and other aspects of lifestyles. He demonstrates how matters of taste and aesthetic judgement reproduce class distinctions among the French people. Extending Marx's notion of capital that is defined solely in economic terms, class for Bourdieu is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that incorporates different forms of capital", including cultural capital that links an individual's socio-economic position and social status (Bourdieu 1984). The bourgeoisie will employ their superior cultural capital in much the same way as their economic capital in order to maintain their position of power. Bourdieu posits that the different patterns of cultural taste and consumption

across the various social classes are an outcome of 'habitus', defined as the socially constituted systems of dispositions that individuals acquire in early life through which he or she perceives and acts in the world (Bourdieu 1984). With regard to film consumption, Bourdieu identifies knowledge of filmmakers as a form of cultural capital acquired by the bourgeoisie. A study done by Dimaggio and Useem (1978) affirm that these patterns can also be found in other advanced capitalist countries like the US where there is a clear binary between commercial films that are closely identified with the working class, and artistic films associated with the high and upper-middle class.

However, there are several limitations in Bourdieu's work. First, although his extensive surveys offer a valuable general picture of the patterns in consumer activity, it is less fruitful for an understanding of the complex meanings that underpin actual consumption practices in specific situational contexts. Hence, a qualitative approach is still needed for this task. Citing Miller (1987), Moores (1993) asserts that Bourdieu did not make any attempt to adopt ethnographic method in his work despite his early training as an anthropologist. As Moores (1993:124) argues, "Thicker forms of description, to borrow Clifford Geertz's term, could serve to complement the survey data." Second, Bourdieu's exclusive focus on class relations forecloses attempts at exploring other kinds of social division. As Murdock (1989:98) questions, "Is class position necessarily always the major stratifying principle underlying cultural consumption? How important are the cross-cutting dimensions of stratification- sex, age [and] ethnicity?"

Of recent works that have engaged with empirical methodologies to study audience reception of films is the collection of essays in Reinhard and Olson's (2016) edited volume, '*Making Sense of Cinema: Empirical Studies into Film Spectators and Spectatorship'*. In this volume, the authors offer a nuanced methodological starting point for future spectatorship studies through a questioning of empirical strategies utilised by researchers who examine how spectators, be it individually or in groups, engage with texts as active audiences rather than passive consumers of hegemonic messages. For instance, in his analysis of young German's responses to *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, 1999), Alexander Geimer employs what he calls the 'documentary method' to advance the concepts and categories that have guided David

Morley's (1980) seminal essay, which examines how the audience's social class position influenced the ways they made meanings out of 'Nationwide', a weekly news and public affairs program produced by British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (Geimer 2016). Following Hall's (1973) assumption about the link between decoding position and class position, the occupational groups sharing a common class category in Morley's study were expected to articulate similar positions.[2] However, this was not the case. For example, within the working class category, diverse readings were found. In fact, all three decoding positions were discovered. As Morley (1983:117) observes, "the apprentice groups, the trade union, shop steward groups and black college students can all be said to share a common class position, but their decoding of a television programme are inflected in different directions by the discourses and institutions in which they are situated". In response to these complexities, and in an attempt to reconstruct Hall's decoding/encoding model, Geimer proposes the framework of documentary method group discussion to show that group composition is not based on theoretically assumed commonalities, but on everyday interactional relationships. Through the concept of 'dissociative appropriation', he demonstrates how ideological critiques in the film are actively negotiated by the youth, yet are irrelevant for real, political action through the simultaneous adoption and rejection of anti-capitalist messages by the youth.

Geimer's attention to the group character of filmic interpretation forms the basis of my own research. However, a caveat needs to be noted. Dividing the audience into such essentialised categories as ethnicity, class and gender may assume homogeneity of spectators within these groups and thus, uniformity in their responses since the categories are already predetermined. As Staiger (1992:13) contends, audiences are still being "idealised" and their experiences are universalised even if it is at a

[2] Stuart Hall's (1973) influential essay, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, theorises how messages are produced and disseminated on media networks, particularly television. By exploring moments of encoding and decoding in the communicative process, Hall argues that communication between the production elites in broadcasting and their audiences is imbued with power relations. According to Hall, television texts are organised around a dominant or preferred mode of meaning. This preferred reading is hegemonic, as it is aligned with the meanings produced by the dominant ideological systems. However, this does not preclude alternative ways of reading the text, such as one that is based on negotiated position, in which the audiences accept some but not all of the principles behind the dominant reading, and oppositional position where the audiences wholly reject the preferred reading position.

"smaller" categorical level. To avoid this pitfall, I postulate that it is important to recognise that the spectators do not represent a monolithic collective but rather a complex and diverse group of individuals. Even within each individual, there are multiple identities where different subject positions may be more pertinent than others at certain points of the reception process. As such, besides considering that social identities are not static, more attention should be focused on the construction and reconstruction of individual subjectivities rather than their identities. At other times, what matters most is not just ethnicity, class or gender per se but the ways in which these social determinants are intermingled, and the complications that arise out of the intersections.

2.2.2 Malaysian Films: Theoretical Debates and Textual Studies

Within Malaysia, much of the literatures on locally produced films have been based on textual analyses of films as well. While older works tend to be limited to the history and evolution of Malaysian cinema (Baharudin 1983; Abi 1987), the more recent ones are focused on the development and narrative elements of specific genres, such as horror, action, Chinese kungfu comedies and box office films (Juliana and Mahyuddin 2009; Khoo 2014; Alicia 2015; Azlina & Jamaluddin 2017a; Azlina and Jamaluddin 2017b; Zairul et. al. 2017). Although there have been works that offer sociological critiques of gendered, ethnicised and classed representations of Malaysian society in local films (Khoo 2006; Anuar 2007), none has explicated how the audience have engaged with these films vis-à-vis their lived experience. Among the few studies that have investigated the practical impacts of film viewing, only Bunnell (2004) has cogently shown how films can be utilised to bring about effective social transformations in reality. In his study 'Re-viewing the *Entrapment* controversy: Megaprojection, (mis)representation and postcolonial experience', Bunnell examines how the release of Fox Movies' *Entrapment* in Malaysia in May 1999 provoked political outrage and popular disappointment at the way in which the Petronas Towers in the capital city Kuala Lumpur had been spliced alongside riverside 'slums' filmed in a town of Malacca some 150 kilometres away. Bunnell demonstrates that *Entrapment*'s misrepresentation of Malaysia stands in huge contradiction to the then Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed's defence of political legitimacy and economic investment of the nation, thereby diagnosing a

geopolitics of asymmetric representational power that is bound up with a politics of postcolonial development. However, beyond the *symbolic* work of reimaging Kuala Lumpur to negate (neo)orientalist imaginings of 'Asian' cities, Bunnell has shown that such film imagery does carry *material* consequences and significance as well. This is indeed so as *Entrapment* has induced Malaysian viewers to use the experience to improve their living conditions and "clean up" their acts. "Clean up" involved attending not merely to the appearance of existing places or environments, but also, to the ways in which citizens should conduct themselves in globally appropriate ways in order to live up to the image of "would-be developed Malaysians" (Bunnell, 2004:302). In so doing, Bunnell highlighted that the politics of *Entrapment* is not reducible to 'Western' (mis)representation and opposition to it. While the reaction of political authorities in Malaysia to the spliced scene may be read as a form of resistance to what Edward Said (1993) calls 'arsenal of images' that reproduce hegemonic power structures, *Entrapment* also heightened (post)colonial fears of 'underdeveloped' people and places. Apart from Bunnell's study, there are no other recent works that have explored the links between films and the lived socio-cultural conditions in Malaysia.

The lack of scholarship that examine how meanings conveyed from films bear relationship to people's socio-cultural lives can be attributed to the dominance of mainstream films that seldom problematise the socio-cultural conditions of locals. These films often contain formulaic content that revolve around the genres of love, horror and action. The dominant language of the films is usually Malay, and the main cast are of Malay descent. It is only in the new millennium that the independent filmmaking movement starts to emerge, beginning with Amir Muhammad's '*Lips to Lips*' (2000) and Yasmin Ahmad's '*Rabun*' (Failing Eyesight) (2003). This new wave of independent filmmakers needs to be distinguished from earlier individual Malaysian filmmakers, such as U-Wei Haji Shaari who may be marginalised within the local commerical film industry. Unlike the previous generation of filmmakers, they are more media-savvy and work collaboratively to support each other (Khoo 2007).

It follows that in the last decade, studies on independent films and filmmaking movement in contemporary Malaysia have attempted to provide alternative discourses

to the literature on mainstream films. While acknowledging that the definitions of 'independent films' or 'indie' for short are open to contestation, indie can be generally defined as those films that are produced using digital video technology, are non-profit-oriented, are privately or self-funded rather than state-funded, and that are made with a budget of under RM100,000 (USD25,000). They are made "without consideration of being screened in the censor-ridden mainstream cinemas" (Weintraub 2011:139). Unlike mainstream films, indie are more heterogeneous ethnically, culturally and linguistically. They embrace diversity in the characters' ethnic background, the use of languages other than just Malay, and feature narratives that extend beyond Malay-related issues. Indie usually broach topics that are deemed 'sensitive' to be discussed in public, including issues of ethnicity and religion (Khoo 2007). As such, they usually raise much public discussion or controversies.

While studies on indie have shed light on the cinematic ethnic relations in Malaysian cinema to a certain degree, there are still gaps in this body of works. First, research on these films from a sociological approach is still lacking. For instance, Catherine Mariampillay (2011) and Lee Yue Beng's (2012) dissertations study the independent filmmaking movement from a melodramatic and historical perspective, respectively. Specifically, their research examine the social, cultural and political factors that have shaped and influenced the development of the movement in Malaysia.

Second, much of the works that have been written on Malaysian independent films are limited to those directed by the late Yasmin Ahmad, particularly '*Sepet*' (Khoo 2009a; Noritah 2011; McKay 2012; Richards and Zawawi 2012; Zaharom 2012; Daniels 2013). Although other films that are directed by Yasmin also attempt to deconstruct hegemonic representations of ethnicity in mainstream films, '*Sepet*' is the one that has garnered the most attention. '*Sepet*' centres on the romantic relationship between two teenagers- Orked, a Malay girl, and Jason, a Chinese boy who sells pirated video compact discs. The couple continues dating despite their community's criticism towards their relationship. Complications ensue when Jason is unable to free himself from his past relationship with the sister of a gangster. Orked breaks up with him but he tries to win her back. Orked then obtains a scholarship to study abroad. While trying to chase her on the way to the airport, Jason gets involved in a road accident.

From a sociological perspective, '*Sepet*' offers fresh insights on the intersections of ethnicity, gender and class, which are often overlooked in Malaysian mainstream films. What distinguishes the portrayal of inter-ethnic relationships in '*Sepet*' from older films of the same theme is the depiction of female rather than male protagonists. In older films that feature inter-ethnic relationships, it is the male protagonists who form the central narratives of the films. Examples include '*Selamat Tinggal Kekaseh-ku*' (Goodbye, My Love) (dir. Lakshamanan Krishnan, 1955), the first inter-ethnic romance in Malay cinema that features the love story between a Malay man and a Chinese lady. The legendary Malay film director Teuku Zakaria Teuku Nyak Puteh or better known as P.Ramlee, also experimented with an inter-ethnic romantic story in '*Gerimis*' (Drizzle, 1968), in which the Malay hero falls in love with an Indian girl (Hassan 2011). In contrast, '*Sepet*' represents a refreshing take on what constitutes Malay womanhood in Malaysia by featuring a heroine who strives against patriarchal oppression. Yasmin's approach of centralising issues around female characters is significant because it sheds light on the struggles that Malay women involved in inter-ethnic relationships face in a highly patriarchal society. For instance, the character Orked in '*Sepet*' has to overcome many conflicts with her Malay friends, who disapprove of her dating Jason. In her defence, Orked criticises the gender bias that disciplines Malay women and not men for engaging in romantic relationships that cross ethnic boundaries.

'*Sepet*' is also much celebrated by some viewers as it questions the hegemony of the Bumiputeras in Malaysia, who are identified as the Malays and indigenous populations of Sabah and Sarawak. By virtue of being Bumiputera, these ethnic groups are accorded a 'special position' by the Federal Constitution (Article 153(1)). According to Article 89 of the Constitution, this position ensures Bumiputeras the "reservation of Malay or native customary land; quotas for admission to public service; issuing of permits or licences for operation of certain businesses; and scholarships, bursaries or other forms of aid for educational purpose" (Ong 2009:466). The rationale in bestowing these groups with the special position is to protect them from competition from the non-Bumiputeras, who are identified as the Chinese, Indians and other non-Malays. '*Sepet*' challenges the fairness of the

Bumiputera policy in Malaysia when it problematises the plight of the working class Jason who has to sell pirated video discs after failing to obtain a scholarship to further his studies despite performing better than Orked in the national examination. As Daniels (2013:109) argues, "*Sepet* transcodes political discourses that challenge the special privileges and primacy of Malay Muslims, and argue for an ethnic and religious pluralism in which diverse Malaysian interact and dialogue as equal belongers".

While this film has contributed to an understanding of multi-ethnicity in Malaysia, and the intersectional identities of the characters, I argue that other films made by filmmakers of different class backgrounds have to be studied as well in order to enrich the literature on independent films. Despite having to make films with very limited funds, the production of '*Sepet*' was possible because of Yasmin's privileged background as an advertising director with Leo Burnett Kuala Lumpur, where she worked as her full-time job (Baumgärtel 2012). The making of '*Muallaf*' (2007) was also made possible with the generosity of a rich man from Ipoh, who enjoyed '*Sepet*' and '*Gubra*' so much that he gave Yasmin US$270,000 to enable its production. Others like Amir Muhammad was also working for Malaysian print media, New Straits Times before turning to independent filmmaking. Unlike these filmmakers, there are those who have to produce films with very limited experience and budgets. Khairil Bakar, for instance, experimented with many low-budget films before making his first feature film '*Ciplak*' ('Plagiarism') with an extremely low budget of RM10, 000. Despite its modest budget, the film received excellent reviews after being released by Golden Screen Cinemas and won the 'Best Alternative Film Award' at the '*Anugerah Skrin* (Screen Awards) 2006'. I contend that the works of these overlooked filmmakers have to be analysed as well as because their films provide important platforms for the problematisation of important social concepts, such as ethnicity and multi-ethnicity.

Among the few scholars who have written extensively about the portrayals of ethnicity in Malaysian cinema are Khoo Gaik Cheng and Hassan Muthalib. In citing a range of indie films including those directed by Yasmin, indie documentary 'The Big Durian' (2003) directed by Amir Muhammad, and '*kungfu*' comedy '*Nasi Lemak* 2.0' (2011) directed by Namewee, Khoo politicises the Malaysian urban landscape

through a discussion of ethnicity and ethnic politics (Khoo 2008; Khoo 2014). Likewise, Hassan's (2012) assertion for the rightful place of Indians in Malaysia through the issues broached by those Indian filmmakers who were born four decades after Malaysian independence contributes to the continuing debate on ethnicisation and identity politics in Malaysia. Hassan's work also sheds light on the struggles faced by non-Malay independent filmmakers who have been excluded from the predominantly Malay/sian film industry despite their mainstream sensibilities. An example of the discrimination they face is the categorisation of local Tamil-language films, such as '*Aandal*' and '*Chemman Chaalai'*, and English-language ones, such as 'The Joshua Tapes' and '*S'kali*', under the rubric of 'International Films' when screened in Malaysian cinemas. This is in accordance with the 1981 National Film Development Corporation Act, which decrees "all Malaysian films must be 70 per cent in the national language, Malay" (Hassan 2012:29). This categorisation renders the film producers ineligible for the entertainment tax rebate of 25 per cent that mainstream filmmakers receive as an incentive for them to make films. It was only recently that this restriction was lifted, due to the proliferation of mainstream Chinese movies (Hassan 2012).

Nevertheless, while the voice and plight of a small group of Indian filmmakers have been represented by the writings of Hassan Muthalib, and despite the increasing acceptance towards locally-produced Chinese commercial films, there is still a lack of academic works on ethnic Chinese films or filmmakers. Even though Khoo's (2006) work on the representations of economic and political developments in Malaysia in local film and literature contain multi-ethnic perspectives, by omitting non-Malay filmmakers, the study ends up as an analysis of the Malay cultural landscape. With the exception of Khoo's (2014) examination of 'Petaling Street Warriors' (dir. James Lee, 2011) and '*Nasi Lemak* 2.0' (dir. Namewee, 2011), there is still a dearth of analyses of the day-to-day issues faced by the Chinese community in Malaysia despite the rise in production of indie films by such successful filmmakers as James Lee and Woo Ming Jin, and new directors like Chris Chong and Yeo Joo Han (Hassan 2013). Where the thorny subjects of ethnicity and religion are broached, it is Yasmin Ahmad's '*Sepet*' that garners more scholarly attention than say, more recent Chinese-language films like Chiu Keng Guan's 'The Journey' (2014). Hence, I argue that it is important to include analyses of non-Malay films and filmmakers as well in order to

capture the multifarious landscape of filmmaking in Malaysia, which encapsulates multi-ethnic directors. An examination of films directed by filmmakers of different ethnic backgrounds would shed light on why certain filmmakers convey their films in the ways they do.

2.3 Literature Review of Audience Reception of Cinematic Ethnic Relations

The rise in film production and youth consumer trends in Malaysia occur alongside the emergence of the new middle class. The middle class formation in Malaysia is not a new phenomenon. Its evolution began even before the British colonial period, but gained momentum during the capitalist development in the 1970s (Rahimah 2012). Compared to the middle-class of the pre-1970s era, which mainly comprised the Chinese who dominated the economy, the middle-class of the post-1970s is more multi-ethnic, as it consists of Malays working in the professional sectors. The higher level of education made possible by the New Economic Policy, a socio-economic affirmative action plan, is a key to well-paid jobs that would increase the purchasing power of individuals. Overall, the new Malaysian middle class enjoy improved standards of living and a new lifestyle that centres on consumer culture (Rahimah 2012). Young adults readily submit to a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption, which includes indulgence in leisure activities, as a form of status symbol. This phenomenon is also reflected in other Asian cities like Indonesia, where leisure activities like cinema going has been associated with the lifestyle of better-off urban youth (Ariel 2011). Located in up-scale shopping malls in capital cities, cinema theaters have been places where young urbanites hang out. Regulations, such as enforcement of security, are put in place to ensure that the underclass does not occupy these spaces.

Despite the close relations between youth and films, there has been a dearth of literature worldwide on how young people, particularly educated youth, engage with the ideological discourses in films. Drotner and Livingstone (2008) affirm that there has not been much empirical research conducted on young people's reception of films since the Payne Fund Studies of movies and their effects on children and youth in the early 1930s. I argue that more studies that examine the engagement of educated youth with sociological discourses in films should be done in order to garner sustained audience feedback on issues pertaining to ethnicity, class and gender. Of works that

have specifically examined youth's reception of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations in films, they have shown how the educational background of the young audience plays an important role in influencing their interpretations of the films. These include Owens's (2009) study of how college students and employees at a Southern university in the United States respond to the film 'Crash' (dir. Paul Haggis, 2005), Brooks and Daniels's (2010) work on how college students and faculty members react to 'Bamboozled' (dir. Spike Lee, 2000) and Fisher's (2006) research on how culturally diverse college students interpret 'Hood' films of the early 1990s. Although categorising audiences into educated and non-educated groups may seem flawed and essentialist, it is not entirely baseless. In these works, the authors highlight how educated audience use films as flashpoints from which to cultivate significant dialogue about the ways in which issues of ethnic relations function within their society.

Within the Malaysian context, there has been no academic work so far that is committed to making ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations in films the main subject of inquiry on youth reception studies. The themes that have garnered more attention among scholars are the representations of Islam and Muslim subjectivities in Malaysian films. These include Daniels' (2013) research that explores how Malaysian youth interpret Yasmin Ahmad's films in relation to the broader cultural, historical and socio-political contexts of the nation, as well as Dahlia's (2014) work that examines how Malaysian women consume portrayals of Malay-Muslim womanhood in four locally produced films and one television mini-series. Daniels adopts a triangulation technique of cinematic textual analysis, context analysis and interviews with 48 Malaysian-Malay youth. By contrasting youth reception of Yasmin's films with those of three Malaysian television dramas with strong Islamic content, Daniels shows the Malay youths' resistance to Yasmin's films, which they interpret as skirting Islamic norms and glossing over a form of multi-ethnicity that challenges the hegemonic position of Islam in Malaysian society. On the other hand, Dahlia's content analyses of selected media and interviews with 54 Malay-Muslim middle-class women living in Kuala Lumpur demonstrate women's aspiration to be a part of a progressive narrative of global Islamic modernity by identifying themselves in religious rather than ethnic terms.

However, a critical review of these works point to several methodological limitations. The responses are only anchored in individual interpretations. They do not reflect the social and inter-subjective dynamics of collective audience responses. By interviewing only Malay youth, and only middle-class women, Daniels and Dahlia's works are respectively unrepresentative of the views of the local audience that comprised members of various ethnic and socio-economic groups. As Kitzinger (2004:171) argues, "the best type of sample is one that maximises possible diversity of interpretation or response, [for example], taking snapshots of different audience groups from very diverse backgrounds or across cultures". Given this lacuna in literature on how contemporary audiences actually interact with filmic texts in relation to others, I contend that carrying out an intersectional analysis of the audience that takes into account the different subjectivities that emerge can productively enrich the approach especially when the topic on inter-ethnic relations is concerned. Variations in responses towards the films may emerge even among people of the same ethnicity, religion and gender considering how the way these identities and axes of differentiation intersect can vary due to factors like differences in social experience. It is to the value of these nuances that the next section will turn in reviewing works on intersectionality, and in justifying intersectionality as the framework of this study.

2.4 Literature Review of Intersectionality and Audience Reception

In audience research that have employed the intersectional framework, none has explicitly used the term intersectionality to show how audience responses may challenge or illuminate this tool of analysis. Much scholarship on intersectionality either begin with the assumption that intersectionality is a finished framework that can be applied to the research inquiry or pay more attention to pre-existing social identities rather than the construction and reconstruction of audience subjectivities. Such an approach is problematic, as reifying concepts like class and gender imply that they are pre-determined categories that inherently influence the social world rather than concepts subject to scrutiny and are imbued with social meanings. In the global context, this is exemplified by David Morley's seminal audience studies in which he explored how the audience's social class position influenced the ways they made meanings out of BBC's 'Nationwide' news program (Morley 1980). Although he was not simply asserting that class position is the only factor that shapes the audience's

decoding strategy, his employment of social class as the organising principle of the focus group discussions with the respondents led to this impression. Rather than showing how class, ethnicity and gender are mutually constitutive in reproducing complex social inequalities, his presumed priority of class as the most macro-level determinant of social categories suggests an implicit assumption that stratification processes occur hierarchically in that class is the category that is most deserving of attention. Such framework is problematic, as it diverts attention away from developing tools that focus on the interactions across socially constructed stratification levels.

Whereas Morley's study had defined the audience principally by class position, Hobson's (1980) paper titled '*Housewives and the Mass Media*' emphasised gender-specific meanings of the media in her analysis of the radio and television reception of young working-class British women caring for children in the home. While Hobson's research provides insights into the gendered differentiation of taste in media consumption, it fails to account for how class differences between the women and their husbands may intersect with gender to account for the former's acquiescence of the latter to watch television programmes of their choice. In her study, it is assumed that women accepted that their male partners have the right to watch 'masculinised' television content, such as news programme or action-packed shows, based on their gender differences. Nowhere in her analysis did she explore how their class position might also influence their lack of power to negotiate.

Of recent scholarship that has specifically employed intersectionality as an approach to studying audience interpretation is Oleksy's recently published book '*Visualizing Difference: Performative Audiencing in the Intersectional Classroom*' (Oleksy 2017). In this research, Oleksy explores how the interconnections between various social identities like sexual orientation and physical ability intersect in her respondents' lived experience and shape their reception of filmic texts. Oleksy's research participants are college students whom she had taught in various courses worldwide, including those from University of California, Berkeley, State University of New Jersey, Rutgers, and international students enrolled in the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women and Gender Studies (GEMMA), which comprises seven European institutions. Through an ethnographic study, Oleksy accessed her audience's reactions

by employing several instruments, including class discussions immediately after film screening sessions, a journal entry that was to be submitted a week or two after the film viewing, and a personal narrative in which they draw on their lived experience in reflecting the films they have watched. Proceeding from thought to practice, Oleksy's research offers a novel approach to media reception by showing how intersectionality can be experienced and embodied. By adopting John Fiske's concept of 'audiencing' (Fiske 1992), which draws attention to how individual viewers bring in their life experience while interpreting meanings encoded in film texts, Oleksy aims to document how a critical analysis of films empowers the students through performative audiencing and gives them incentives to actively challenge hegemonic power effects.

I find Oleksy's goals problematic for several reasons. First, Oleksy holds the assumption that the students will necessarily be empowered solely through the act of interlacing discussions and reflections on the film with their personal accounts. By implication, she also believes that the films necessarily embody empowering qualities and that the audience's connection to the film is one that is characterised by a relationship of dependence and hierarchical power relations in which the audience occupy a marginal position. I argue that framing her research this way defeats the goal of letting the audience speak for themselves and making sense of their identities. Another way in which the author defies this objective is by assuming that the audience has the capacity to identify the intersections represented in the films. Assigning expectations to the subjects validates Oleksy's approach in using the films as a stimulus to not only generate the narratives, but to determine the way in which the narratives should be structured. This approach poses epistemological concerns regarding the ethics of conducting research, and raises the question of whose voice is the researcher representing other than his or her own. By formulating questions for the respondents on the basis of the framework that is of interest to the researcher instead of letting them offer their own ideas about identity would pose theoretical drawbacks, especially if the respondents would not have interpreted the films through a conscious recognition of the intersectional identities present in the films.

Additionally, by expecting the audience to interpret the films in a resistant manner assumes that the audience know the preferred interpretation and are necessarily

opposed to the dominant ideologies in the text. Even if they are resistant, there has been no evidence to suggest that an oppositional reading would give the individual any real social agency or produce any social change (Staiger 2005). Such work therefore rehashes anachronous writings on popular culture that produce simplistic theories on popular cultural texts and the audience. These include De Certeau's (1984) book titled '*The Practice of Everyday Life*' and Fiske's two volumes titled '*Understanding Popular Culture*' (Fiske 1989) and '*Reading the Popular*' (Fiske 1992). In these works, the authors suggest popular consumption as "tactics of the weak against the strategies of the strong" (Moores 1993:131). Characterising popular everyday practices like watching television as a way for subordinate groups in society to resist the power of the dominant is problematic. The authors' mapping of text-reader relation to a power/struggle binary is not only simplistic. It suggests that popular television necessarily leads to the production of resistant readings by subordinate groups.

In audience reception works on Malaysia, some scholars have also slipped into this tendency of framing their works through the model of oppression and resistance. Many of these works have elucidated how social categories like ethnicity are constructed and appropriated by the state, and offered fresh insights in interrogating the meanings of ethnicity and ethnicised identities in the local context from the perspectives of media consumers. They have also problematised how ethnicised ideas, concerns and statuses come into play in the audience narratives. This is exemplified by Dahlia's (2014) research that examines how urban Malay-Muslim women in Malaysia negotiate state anxieties over the position of their ethnic and gender identities in their interpretation of selected local films and television drama series. While Dahlia uncovers her interviewees' consumption tactics through their own sensibilities, there are still gaps in the research. Framing the audience's consumption practices as forms of resistance to the Malay nationalist political elites assumes that state-society relations are necessarily ideological, thereby foreclosing any attempts at exploring other ways of constructing audience subjectivities.

In view of this, some scholars have highlighted the banality of the concept of 'resistance' in research on audience reception and intersectionality (Md Azalanshah and Runnel 2014; Singh 2015). For instance, Md Azalanshah and Runnel's 2014

study explores how Malaysian Malay women negotiate the meanings of modernity as represented in non-Western soap operas forms one of the corpus of scholarship that attempts to deconstruct this notion of resistance. The Malaysian authorities initially identified soap operas from other Asian countries as a tool to promote the state's vision of Asian-style modernity that is alternative to Western modernity. However, in a later period, they expressed concerns regarding the threat that such soaps may bring to the cultural integrity of Malay women (Md Azalanshah and Runnel 2014). Instead of suggesting that the soap operas will necessarily act as sites for female resistance against the patriarchal Islamist state, Md Azalanshah and Runnel show how Malay female audiences mobilise viewing tactics that they called 'watching competencies' to negotiate the pleasures and tensions found in the soaps. For example, Malay women may aspire to the images of 'modern' lifestyle in huge Asian cities, but still uphold Malay customs and Islamic traditions in their interpretational frame. However, while their research attempts to transcend rigid frameworks of oppression and resistance, it is still focused on the situated behaviour of one ethnic group. As such, future research needs to take into account the views of other ethnic groups as well.

2.5 An Intersectional Framework for Exploring Audience Engagement with Inter-Ethnic Films

The copious scholarship on intersectionality has paid little attention to the discursive spaces of media interpretation where different kinds of audience subjectivities are likely to emerge. Few have documented how interconnections between various social differentials intersect in audience's lived experience and shape their interpretation of media. Works that have adopted this approach contain limitations as discussed in the previous section. Thus, my research aims to address this lacuna by exploring how the respondents' interpretations of the films relate to their lived experience from the perspective of intersectionality. It extends previous research on similar topics by focusing on how the intersubjective dynamics of a multi-ethnic audience response shed light on broader social processes, particularly, state-sponsored Islamisation in Malaysia.

I argue that situating the research within the context of Islamisation would enrich the literature on the impacts of Islamisation on the different ethnicities in Malaysia since

existing studies have only focused on how it is appropriated by and for the Muslim community. Furthermore, the meanings that individuals produce out of interpretive activities are not neutral but are produced within specific historical and social contexts, which inform their subject positions in diverse ways (Hall 1973; Staiger 1992). Staiger (2002; 1992) identifies three approaches researchers have adopted in dealing with film spectatorship. The first is the text-activated approach, which argues that explaining spectatorship depends on understanding the film text. The second, which is the spectator-activated approach, concerns theories and methodologies that promote the spectator as actively engaging with the film within the parameters of a socially or culturally defined category. Realising the limitations of this approach, where the spectator is idealised to embody and represent characteristics of the larger group, Staiger argues for the incorporation of a context-activated approach where the spectator's meaning-making activities are bound by the historical period in which spectatorship happens. By considering the interaction of the audience with the text in a specific context of engagement, it shows that meanings are neither derived solely from the films nor the spectators alone. While Staiger only focuses on the temporal aspect of filmic consumption, my research considers both the temporal as well as spatial contexts in which engagement takes place. In view of the latter, I adopt Sullivan's (2013:163) definition of context, which he refers to as "a place and a web of interpersonal relationships and interactions that occur within that space." By contextualising my research within both the temporal and spatial aspects of interpretation, I aim to contribute to a more rigorous approach to empirical studies on audience reception.

2.5.1 Justifications for Intersectionality

My choice of adopting intersectionality as a framework for my research follows from Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge's assertion that intersectionality's value lies in its combination of cultural and structural analyses (Collins and Bilge 2016). This argument is made in response to the criticisms of those who contend that works on intersectionality has paid too much attention to identity politics at the expense of structural analyses, especially materialist critique of power and social class. Instead, rejecting the dichotomy between identity politics and structural critique of power expands discussions on intersectionality by engaging with how wider socio-political

processes may influence people's lives. This is aligned with my research that aims to highlight how collective political consciousness emerges when the audience articulate their lived experiences in connection to broader social forces.

It is for this reason that this dissertation employs intersectional theory as a tool of analysis instead of other paradigms like symbolic interactionism or structure-versus-agency debate. The symbolic interaction perspective analyses societal behaviour by examining the subjective meanings that individuals create and interpret in the process of social interaction (Babbie 2013). Although it has been employed in research that studies inter-ethnic interactions and perceptions (Muller 2011), critics have claimed that it ignores the macro level of social interpretation, that is, the influence of social structures and institutions on individual interactions (Shepard 2010). With regard to audience reception of inter-ethnic relations, this perspective may not account for how social forces, such as systemic racism or gender discrimination, shape perceptions of inter-ethnic and gender relations. Similarly, the approach might overlook the role that the institution of mass media plays in influencing social meanings related to ethnicity. Likewise, the structure-agency theory bears similar limitations, including how the polarity fails to examine the interplay between the two components of the social system. Furthermore, it fails to capture the multifariousness of social reality in that neither does social reality completely shapes individuals' actions and behaviour nor do individuals entirely influence social reality (Kirchberg 2007).

My stance on intersectionality is also predicated upon the recognition that intersectionality criticises the silencing of minority voices. As Staiger (2005) argues, the theory of intersectionality of minority identities has been the richest contribution to media reception studies. This can be illustrated by Bobo's (1988) study that examines African American's reactions to Steven Spielberg's adaptation of Alice Walker's novel '*The Color Purple*' (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1985). In her research, Bobo aims to examine how Black audiences form meanings from this mainstream film, and use the reconstructed meanings to empower themselves and their social group. Bobo discovered that although protests occurred among many black men over the inaccurate representation of black people, black women generally gave a positive reaction to the film. They even defended it on the basis that it was a realistic portrayal of black people's lives and an attempt to make them central to the narratives. Bobo

attributes this variation in reactions to the oppositional stance that black women adopt when engaging with mainstream media. Yet, at the same time, intersectionality does not just focus on the intersections of marginalised identities but the experience of a combination of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw 1989; McCall 2005). It is for this reason that critical race feminists have employed an inclusive intersectional perspective in their works on top of the critical race feminist theory they are using in recognition of the confluence of the multiple marginalised and privileged identities in one's lived experience (Wing 2003; Vaccaro 2017).

More broadly, my research aims to advance understandings of what it means for sociologists to practise intersectionality as a theoretical approach in works on inter-ethnic relations. It builds on the works of sociologists like Yuval-Davis (2006), Sherwood (2010) and Wilkins (2012) in studying how the the narratives of ethnic subjects do not merely emerge out of ethnicised concerns, but of a wider array of identity dilemmas. For instance, Wilkins's ethnographic work with black college women explores how they tell stories about inter-ethnic relationships between black women and white men (Wilkins 2012). Her work is instructive in that it enables a more comprehensive understanding of the intersections of sexuality with gender, ethnicity and class by highlighting not only the ways other identity categories influence sexual practices, but also how ideas about sexuality can be used to claim, maintain and contest normative gendered, classed and ethnicised meanings. Hence, by treating sexuality as a system of meanings mobilised by differently situated people for various ethnic and gender purposes, Wilkins resists the reification of sexuality. My research seeks to do likewise by treating young people's narratives as an important resource for examining how various intersectional subjectivities emerge from the spaces of filmic discussions. Oleksy (2017) recognises the value of intersectionality accurately when she argues that while multiculturalism often examines group identity rather than the subjectivities of members constituting the group, intersectionality goes further than that by placing emphasis on the dynamic process of subjectivity production (Oleksy 2017).

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has reviewed past and current sociological approaches to analysing the film. In arguing for an extension of scholarship that interrogates the relationship between films and sociology, it has noted several gaps in the extant literature. These include a lack of empirical studies that examine real audience's perspectives and interactions with others in situ. In so doing, I have argued that audience research that adopts a sociological perspective should not just be limited to the individual's film viewing experience alone, one that merely explores their lived personal accounts that draw on the films discussed. It should also investigate the immediate environment in which the film viewing activities take place as well. Specifically, this means exploring how the audience make meanings based on their inter-subjective positions as well as in negotiation with others. Beyond providing a glimpse of the audience's lived experience, the social context of film viewing also offers a means by which meanings about ethnicity, class and gender are reproduced, accessed and challenged. In view of this, intersectionality provides a useful and relevant framework for exploring how various social identities may be interwined in the audience's narratives. By treating narratives as central to the processes of subjective formations and interpersonal interactions, my research seeks to contribute to sociological works that examine how intersectionality can be put into practice.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a methodological outline of my research. It justifies the choice of research methods (section 3.2), details the process of data collection (section 3.3) and explains how the data was analysed (section 3.4). I then reflect on issues of research ethics and positionality (section 3.5) before concluding the chapter (section 3.6). Adopting a triangulation strategy, this chapter discusses how the chosen research methods can illuminate our understanding of young people's negotiations with inter-ethnic discourses based on a case study of Malaysian undergraduates' engagement with ethnicised themes in local films.

3.2 Research Methods

3.2.1 Triangulation Strategy

This research employs the **triangulation** strategy, which combines multiple research methods in order to analyse the same research questions. Alongside the increasing number of researchers who have recognised the ability of multi-method approaches to yield "broader and often better results" (Fontana and Frey 2000:668), I analysed both primary and secondary sources in my inquiry. Secondary sources range from academic publications, government policy reports, local films containing inter-ethnic and ethnicised themes, filmmakers' blogs and film reviews. Primary sources constitute face-to-face in-depth semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews with Malaysian undergraduates from two universities in the greater Kuala Lumpur region following compulsory screening sessions of selected films. Ethnographic methodologies have proven useful in research on audience reception of films, and which employ an intersectional framework that explores how the audience engage with films at the intersections of their social identities (Fisher 2006; Oleksy 2017; Vaccaro 2017).

Additionally, I have used **content analysis** to examine narratives, scenes and dialogues in all the films. This technique, which allows the researcher to systematically examine message characteristics in pre-existing materials, has been

commonly used in studies that analyse how ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations are portrayed in films (Neuendorf 2002). These include Buckler's (2008) research that identifies how ethnic-based behaviour and ethnic stereotypes are depicted in the 2005 American film 'Crash', Ramasubramaniam's (2005) analysis of the portrayal of Indians in films produced in the United States and United Kingdom, and May's (2011) study on the representations of ethnicity and gender in Disney Princess films. In all of these studies, content analysis proves useful in contributing to existing literature on ethnicity by explicating exactly how films construct images and commentaries about ethnicised behaviours and stereotypes.

I also held a compulsory **film screening** session prior to each focus group interview. Although I have argued in Chapter 2 that the audience's interpretations of a film are not based on their direct engagement with the films per se but rather with the connections they have to available discourses and real social conditions of existence, holding a session where they watch films in situ helps to eliminate many external factors that may influence their positions. I have chosen this method, as research have shown that conducting focus group screenings is an effective means to mobilise viewers and raise their awareness about issues that they may not be aware of previously but that affect their livelihood in significant ways. This is exemplified by the screening of a documentary of the damming of the Nu River and the construction of Manwan Dam on the Mekong River in China by environmental activist Shi Lihong to the communities affected by these activities (Viviani 2014). Prior to the screening, the local population were generally agreeable to the dam's construction and opined that, "the government decided, so it should be good" (Viviani 2014:118). However, after Shi Lihong's environmental group organised screenings of the footage of the communities that were adversely affected by the government project, the locals' attitudes towards the project changed completely.

I have also decided to conduct **focus group interviewing** for several reasons. First, this method has been used widely across a range of disciplines that engage in research on audience engagement with media, including political science (Carpini and Williams 1994; Kullberg 1994) and communication studies (Staley 1990; Albrecht *et al* 1993). Within sociology, it has been useful in a variety of fields, such as medical sociology (McKinlay 1993; Kitzinger 1994), political sociology (Gamson 1992) and

sociology of aging (Knodel 1995; Morgan 1996). It has also been employed in inter-disciplinary research, such as media studies and cultural studies, as exemplified by Shively's (1992) work on the responses of Anglos and American Indians to cowboy movies, which adopts a cultural studies framework.

Second, this method has also proven effective in exploring group norms, as well as the specific attitudes, beliefs, emotions and experiences of participants by observing their interaction with others in situ (Berg 2004; King and Horrocks 2010). This allows the researcher to uncover how participants of various social backgrounds negotiate meanings, mobilise or contest media representations with one another (Kitzinger 2004). Focus groups have been used as a research method in major scholarly works on audience studies, such as Morley's 'Nationwide Studies' in which he recruited 29 groups of two to 13 people to watch specific episodes of the 'Nationwide' program before getting them to participate in an open discussion of it. Likewise, Liebes and Katz (1994) recruited over 400 Israeli participants to form 66 groups in order to observe how these participants watch the American primetime melodrama, 'Dallas'. Jhally and Lewis (1992) also used focus groups to explore the attitudes of ordinary Americans of various ethnic backgrounds towards issues of ethnicity and social class in 'The Cosby Show' programme. The advantages of focus groups would help to address my research questions, as studying attitudinal and behavioural patterns in multi-ethnic settings would provide me with insights into the operation of group and social processes in everyday lives.

Despite these advantages, some scholars have argued that focus group interviews produce less data than individual interviews (Berg 2004). For example, in a controlled experiment, Fern (1982) demonstrated that one-on-one interviews would have produced a lot more or better data than focus group interviews of an equivalent number of participants. Furthermore, researchers who have used focus group techniques have observed that group dynamics may interfere with individual opinion (Fontana and Frey 2000; Berg 2004). The social pressure to conform to the views held by the majority may result in participants simply agreeing with one another, resulting in little discussion of issues. In other situations, there is also a risk of some participants dominating the discussion by speaking at length on the topic or in an authoritative tone (Hennick 2007). Additionally, the group setting may also afford

less confidentiality to participants than an individual interview, which may cause some to withhold certain information, thereby reducing the depth and quality of data collected (David and Sutton 2004). This is especially so for research on topics like ethnicity, which is still deemed sensitive and taboo in Malaysia.

In view of these limitations, I have also conducted in-depth **individual semi-structured interviews** with undergraduates who are not participating in the focus groups, with the aim of exploring similar themes that are used in the focus groups. Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews will allow me some flexibility in probing participants with questions beyond the prepared set whenever necessary. One-on-one interviews have also proven an effective means of gaining access to complicated social issues based on how people make meanings out of their lived experience (Seidman 2013). Moreover, unlike large-scale quantitative techniques, interview methodologies tend to contribute to "depth and detailed understanding" of the research topic rather than "breadth and coverage" (McDowell 2010:158). This is significant for my research in enabling me to interrogate how people's lived experiences would maintain, challenge or subvert dominant state discourses that may not necessarily attend to the particularities of the mundane, everyday experience of the people.

This method is popular among sociologists working on the issue of race. A case in point is Alford Young who conducted intensive interviews with 26 young African-American men in Chicago to examine their experiences of living in one of the most ethnically segregated parts of the city (Young 2006). W.E.B Du Bois, a renowned American sociologist, also recognised the significance of one-on-one interviews in studies about race when he asserted that, "I seem to see a way of elucidating the inner meaning of life and significance of that race problem by explaining it in terms of the one human life that I know best" (Wideman 1990:xiv). Furthermore, by skilfully combining qualitative in-depth interviews with survey data of the same respondents, sociologist Bonilla-Silva shows that although Whites have been displaying socially desirable responses to ethnic prejudice questions on surveys, the ways in which they frame their answers to the same questions in in-depth interviews is nowhere as

optimistic (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2006). [3] Therefore, in exploring how the undergraduates interpret and live out ethnic politics in their daily lives, carrying out interviews on individuals proved to be a practical strategy.

3.2.2 Population and Sampling

The population of respondents under study was Malaysian undergraduates studying in Kuala Lumpur (KL). According to the United Nations definition of youth, youth are those aged between 15 and 24 years old (The United Nations Programme on Youth 2011). However, this definition varies across countries. The National Youth Development Policy in Malaysia defines youth as those aged between 15 and 35 years (National Youth Development Policy 1997). Taking this into consideration, as well as the full legal age of 18 years of a child in Malaysia as defined by the Child's Act in 2001 (Noor Azira *et. al.* 2013), the participants who are eligible to take part in my research are those aged between 18 and 30 years old. Most of my interviewees fall within the typical college age category of 18 to 22 years old.

I have chosen KL in the state of Selangor as the site of fieldwork because given its position as the hub of the Malay film industry, it functions as the main site from which discourses on ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations would flow. Furthermore, research on institutes of higher learning in Malaysia shows that KL, being the capital, largest city, and economic centre in Malaysia has attracted students from myriad ethnic groups from other states (Asia School of Business 2015). The abundance of public and private colleges in KL also offers a variety of courses that may not be found in other states. Notwithstanding these diversities, I did not limit my inquiry to the KL capital alone but instead extended the geographical scope to the Greater KL region, which is defined as an area covered by 10 municipalities surrounding KL, each of which is governed by local authorities (Figure 3.1). Prime Minister Najib

[3] O'Brien's (2011) study shows that results from standard survey questions like "Do you approve of inter-racial marriage?" and "Do you have any Black friends?" have been used by quantitative researchers to justify that Whites' prejudices have been declining over the years. However, Bonilla-Silva's interview data revealed something different altogether. The same White respondent who indicated that s/he approves of inter-racial marriage in the survey will often mention in an in-depth interview that s/he has never been attracted to someone of a different race and expressed hesitation about anyone in his or her immediate family doing so. Likewise, a huge percentage of White survey respondents who stated that they had a close Black friend, did not list that person in their list of five closest friends in an interview format (O'Brien 2011).

Razak refers to this area as the urban agglomeration aimed at spurring the country's economic growth and liveability by 2020 (Ministry of Federal Territories 2014).

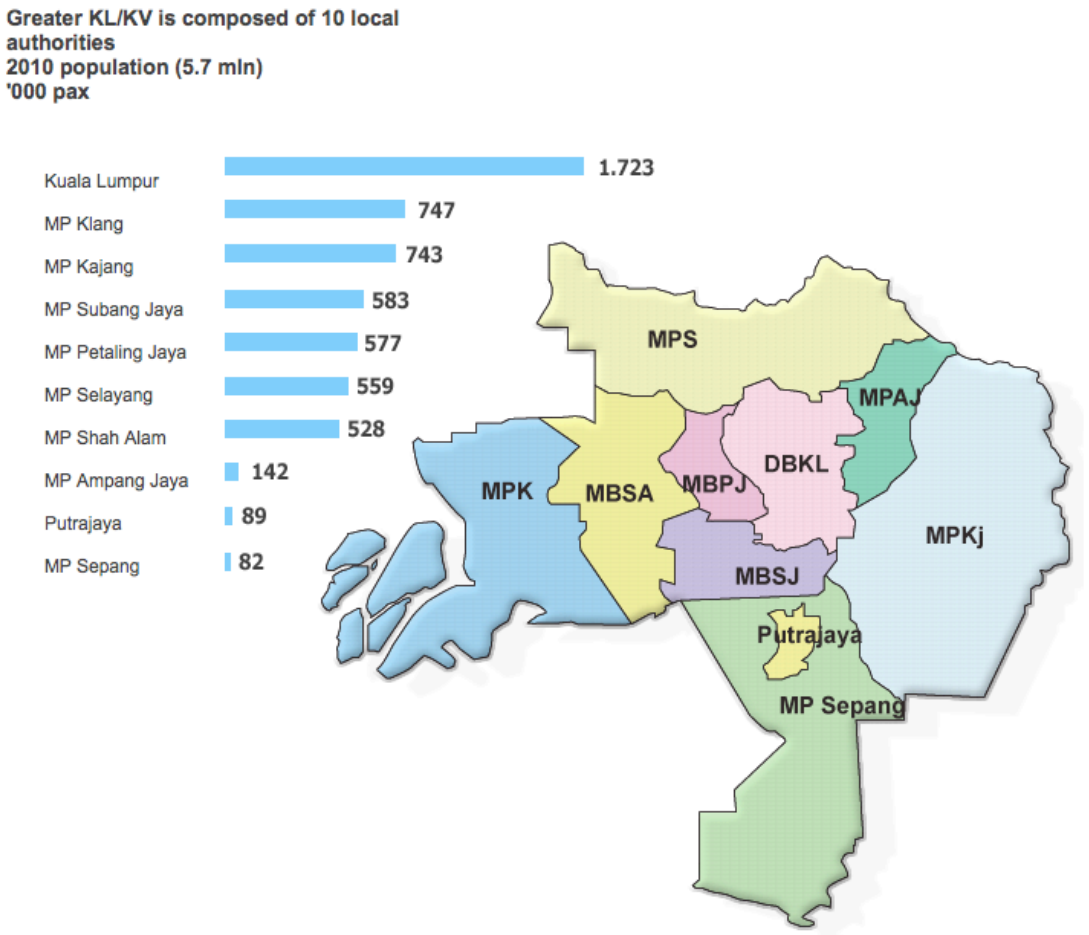

Figure 3.1: Map of Greater Kuala Lumpur

Source: Official Website of Greater Kuala Lumpur/ Federal Territory, Ministry of Federal Territory, 2014

http://app.kwpkb.gov.my/greaterklkv/overview/

For both the focus group and individual interviews, I adopted two types of nonprobability sampling known as **purposive sampling** and **convenience sampling**. While the former technique enabled me to select the undergraduates based on my judgement about which unit of undergraduate would be the most useful for and relevant to my research objectives, the latter allowed me to reach out to informants who were readily available to participate in my study (Babbie 2013). This study focuses on a small sample group, as it is interested in exploring the subjective experiences of the undergraduates. As such, it pays attention to their narratives in an

attempt to conduct an in-depth analysis of their attitudes rather than seek to generalise the findings to broader patterns of consumption of inter-ethnic films in Southeast Asia.

Since I wish to study only a small subset of the larger population of undergraduates, I only sampled students from multi-ethnic universities. As such, students from universities with a single ethnic intake like UiTM were not sampled.[4] I have placed great importance to ethnic diversity in my sample in order to interrogate how youth from different ethnic backgrounds interpret the inter-ethnic themes in the films. I ensured fair representation of each of the ethnic groups in Malaysia as shown in Table 3.1. 'Other Bumiputera' in Table 3.1 refers to non-Malays like ethnic Sabahans and Sarawakians. Bearing in mind that ethnicity as a social identity does not exist on its own but intersects with other social determinants like gender and social class, I have also ensured fair representation of undergraduates of various gender and socio-economic backgrounds.

Table 3.1: Distribution of Citizen Population by Ethnic Group

Ethnic Group	Percentage in 2010
Malay	54.6
Other Bumiputera	12.8
Chinese	24.6
Indian	7.3
Others	0.7
Total	**100.0**

Source: 2010 Population Census (Saw 2015)

Research on higher education institutions in Malaysia in 2012 has shown that out of the 1.3 million tertiary students, 58 per cent are enrolled in public colleges, 35 per cent in private ones and 7 per cent are studying abroad (Lee 2015). Thus, interviewing

[4] [4] UiTM refers to Universiti Institut Teknologi Mara, which only enrols *Bumiputeras*.

students from both public and private universities would increase the diversity of the sample. In this research, I sampled students from one public and one private university, namely, University of Malaya, and Unitar International University, respectively.

The objectives of selecting this sample are two-fold. First, it enables me to tap on the views of students who attend schools with different ethnic make-up. While Malay students dominate public institutions, non-Malay students form the majority of student population in private institutions. Although the Mahathir administration introduced an ostensibly merit-based admissions policy into local public universities after 2002, the proportion of intake by ethnic group continue to reflect the country's ethnic makeup (Lee 2013). The intake into public institutions, excluding UiTM, by ethnic groups in 2005 was 69.9 per cent Malay/Bumiputeras, 21.9 per cent Chinese and 5.1 per cent Indians. Malay admission had clearly exceeded the ethnic quota system of admission, which used to hover around 55 per cent. If UiTM's enrolment were included, it would raise the Malay/Bumiputera share to 82 per cent of the total enrolment, compared to the 13.2 per cent Chinese intake and 3.1 per cent intake of Indians. Apart from being discriminated against by ethnic-based policies, the non-Malays prefer to opt for private universities, as the education system uses English as the medium of instruction, which would give them a competitive edge when it comes to job applications (Tan and Santhiram 2014).

My sample proves the disparity in ethnic make up between the public and private institutions. Although official figures were not available to reflect the ethnic breakdown of students from both universities, months of spending time in the field and engaging in conversations with various groups of people including the Dean and Head of Department of the universities provided me with a sense of their ethnic composition. While the student populations of both universities are multi-ethnic, the obvious ethnic imbalance based on fieldwork observations and findings affirm scholarly works on the ethnic quota system in public universities, and the high proportion of non-Malays in private universities. Malay students are prevalent on the campus of University of Malaya, the public institution where I did my fieldwork, as are the Indian students at Unitar International Univesity, the private institution where I sourced for respondents. My respondents and the lecturers had informed me that the

high population of Indian residents living in the neighbourhood of Kelana Jaya accounts for the dominance of Indian students at the latter university. The university's management board, whom I understand is led by an ethnic Indian, is also a pull factor in attracting the Indian students to study at Unitar International University.

The second objective of interviewing students from both public and private institutions is to ensure socio-economic representativeness of the sample. Research has shown that students who attend local private institutions are generally those who hail from economically well-off households that can afford to pay the high tuition fees, which is about 10 times that of the fee of local public universities (Tan and Santhiram 2014). Although loans are available from the National Higher Education Fund Board, they do not always cover all the expenses incurred (Tan and Santhiram 2014). Rising intra-ethnic inequality in Malaysia's higher education industry partly accounts for this. The NEP's goal of nurturing a class of Malay bourgeoisie has resulted in the misallocation of resources that enable Malay children from the upper and middle classes to succeed at the expense of others. Children of the Malay elites often obtain the most sought-after scholarships, especially for overseas study, whereas qualified Malay students from the lower-income groups, particularly from the rural areas, usually have to settle for local public institutions (Lee 2013). Thus, it would be insightful to examine the influence of class factor in determining the youth's attitudes towards inter-ethnic relations.

From the total population of students, I selected a minimum of 80 and a maximum of 100 students within greater KL to participate in the focus group interviews that comprised about six or seven students per group. Within each of the two universities, I identified at least six student groups. Some of the groups comprised students of different ethnicities whereas others were made up of students from the same ethnicity. Studies have shown that participation in dialogues about ethnicity and racism have raised concerns among the participants, including expressing comments that may be deemed racist by others (Fox 2009; Vaccaro 2017). As such, in an attempt to create a setting where such fears would be minimised, researchers like Vaccaro (2017) had White students and students of colour participating in separate focus groups in her research on student silence in a multicultural classroom. My study also adopts this approach. However, as I was also interested in exploring whether the dynamics of

student interaction in a focus group made up of students from multi-ethnic backgrounds would differ from those of a single ethnic background, I organised the students into both kinds of groups.

I recruited a maximum of seven students into each group based on **random selection**. As Babbie (2013) argues, random selection removes the risk of the researcher imposing his or her own conscious or unconscious bias on the research in a way that supports the research hypotheses. Moreover, the number of students to be recruited from each group is based on the decision that it would be difficult to sustain discussion if the figure is below six and as difficult to manage discussion if it is above 10. Thus, I resonate with Berg's (2004) advice to keep the group size to a maximum of seven participants.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Content Analysis of Films

3.3.1.1 Film Selection and Coding Procedures

The films were selected based on a number of considerations, namely, type of films produced, year of production, plot or narratives, and characters featured. In terms of film type, I examined both local mainstream and indie films in order to provide a comprehensive overview of the cinematic representations of inter-ethnic relations. I selected a purposive sample of feature films and short films, as there are also short films found on video-sharing sites that problematise ethnic issues in Malaysia. In terms of year of production, I limited my inquiry to films made in Malaysia from the late 1960s onwards, particularly in 1967, as research has shown that this was the year that marked the beginning of the Malay film industry in the country (Barnard 2008; Teo 2017). This was after the industry, which had originated and flourished in Singapore since the 1930s suffered from a slew of financial and union issues that caused it to shift its operations to its present hub in Malaysia. Hence, 1967, which marked the year that would witness Malaysia becoming the Malay filmmaking hub in the region, is taken as the cut-off year from which I shortlisted my selection of films.

Moreover, I only analysed films that were produced up till early January 2016, as that marked the end of my fieldwork in Malaysia. As such, I did not include other inter-ethnic films that were produced after this period in my analysis, such as '*Ola Bola*' (Glorious Football, dir. Chiu Keng Guan, 2016), which was released in late January 2016.

With regard to the content of the films, I chose those films that contain both direct and subtle references to ethnicity in at least half of the film's narratives. Major themes include ethnic issues that are commonly debated in the national public arena, such as the Bumiputera privilege, and the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations in the country. In addition to the themes, the characters and dialogues also determined my choice of films. A film that contains inter-ethnic themes should also feature characters from two or more ethnic backgrounds. Otherwise, where characters from only one ethnic group are portrayed, they should articulate dialogues that make reference to ethnicised issues. The selection came down to a total of 27 films, as shown in the filmography in Appendix A. The film genres range from dramas to romantic comedies and historical films. The films were made by directors from multi-ethnic backgrounds and employ a mix of languages. Where there was the use of Chinese dialects, and no subtitles were offered, I sought the assistance of friends with dialect competency for translation given my limited language proficiency.

Before travelling to Kuala Lumpur, I watched all 27 films at least twice in order to identify scenes and dialogues that feature themes that are ethnicised. I define a scene as "a division of [a] film that [presents] continuous action in one place or a single unit of dialogue taking place [in the narrative]" (Ramasubramaniam 2005:250). While watching the films, I adopted Watkins' (2007) framework in helping me to think through the significant aspects of the films. This framework urges viewers to organise their thoughts based on several key questions, including the key themes of the films and the contexts in which the films are made. It is also useful for leading focus group discussion (Watkins 2007).

I coded different aspects of inter-ethnic relations into categories that comprised various socio-cultural variables, including expressions of inter-ethnic romance and

multi-ethnicity. Inter-ethnic romance involves couples from different ethnic backgrounds. Expressions of multi-ethnicity were coded as portrayals of ethnic-based behaviour and references to ethnic-based statements made by the characters in the films in the following situations: between members of different ethnic groups ("inter-ethnic"), those that occur within the same ethnicity ("intra-ethnic") and those that provide commentary on ethnic relations in society ("societal") (Buckler 2008:7).

3.3.2 Focus Group Interviews

3.3.2.1 Participant Recruitment

In order to gain access to participants for the focus group interviews, I sought the assistance of my friends who are lecturing at two universities in Malaysia- Unitar International University, a private institution in Kelana Jaya, and University of Malaya, a public university in the federal territory of Wilayah Persekutuan. King and Horrocks (2010) have acknowledged that such a strategy would increase the chances of successful recruitment especially if the 'insider' assistant is a known and trusted colleague, as he or she is more likely to give a proper consideration to the request than if it were to come from a stranger. Indeed, these friends of mine proved invaluable informants for my research, especially in terms of recruitment and logistics aspects.

The interviews were held from March 2015 to January 2016. I scheduled my trips such that they coincided with the students' semester periods so that I could establish the initial point of contact with them immediately after their classes. Hence, I arranged for a face-to-face meeting with them after class in order to share information about my research and to obtain the contact numbers of those who were keen to participate. Subsequent correspondences were done mainly through 'Whatsapp', which is an application that can be downloaded from a smart phone. 'Whatsapp' is a very convenient way of recruiting respondents as majority of them replied to my message almost instantaneously when contacted through this form of communication as opposed to other means, like email, which they hardly checked. Moreover, with functions that enabled me to create 'group chats', 'Whatsapp' greatly facilitated my coordination of appointments with the focus groups. Through 'Whatsapp', I arranged the time of the interviews according to the respondents' convenience. Throughout the

recruitment period, I encouraged them to clarify any doubts they had about the research and their roles, and kept in regular contact with them, which ultimately led to fruition of the meeting.

To facilitate the interview process, I informed the students the topic of my research and encouraged them to prepare a list of inter-ethnic films that they may have already watched. The purpose of sharing this information with them was to broaden the current literature on inter-ethnic films beyond those directed by Yasmin Ahmad. In an attempt to do so, I left the definition of 'inter-ethnic' film open to the students' interpretation. This strategy enabled me to uncover any taken-for-granted aspects of local films that could be considered inter-ethnic, and problematise existing scholarly definitions of 'inter-ethnic' films, or discourses that are deemed 'ethnicised'. It also allowed spontaneous discussions about the themes and issues that formed the central concerns of the students without hinging on box office successes or marketing ploys. However, to ensure sustained discussions of the films, I informed them that they should already be familiar with the narratives and major themes in the films prior to meeting me, which meant that they would have to watch the films again if they could not recall the storyline.

Altogether, I recruited 82 students to form 13 focus groups. Out of these 13 groups, five are made up of participants from the same ethnicity, such as all-Chinese or all-Malays. Eight others consist of participants from different ethnicities within each group. Table 3.2 provides an overview of the ethnic backgrounds of students interviewed. The composition of students was fairly diverse, with students coming from various courses of study, socio-economic backgrounds and states in both Peninsular and East Malaysia. Representative samples were obtained for all variables. Altogether, my respondents ended up consisting of 51 men and 45 women, of whom 43 were Muslims, 18 were Buddhists, 14 were Hindus, 13 were Christians, 5 were Taoists, and 3 were atheists. Out of the 43 Muslims, only two of them were ethnic Indians. One was of Melanau ethnicity whereas the other 40 were Malays. Given the dominance of Malays in the sample, it is not possible to generalise the findings to broader patterns of how the intersections of race and religion of the non-Malay Muslims may differ from the Malay Muslims. Only the subjective experiences and attitudes of individual Muslims can be explored. In terms of ethnicity, 40 of the

respondents were ethnic Malays, 28 were ethnic Chinese, 16 were ethnic Indians whereas 12 others were non-Malay Bumiputeras.

Table 3.2: General Profile of Focus Group Participants Based on Ethnicity

Group	Total Number of Respondents Per Group	Breakdown of Respondents Based on Ethnicity
A	6	4 Malays, 1 Indian, 1 Sabahan Dusun
B	6	4 Malays, 2 Indians
C	6	5 Malays, 1 Indian
D	6	All Indians
E	7	5 Malays, 1 Chinese, 1 Iban Bidayuh
F	6	All Indians
G	7	2 Malays, 5 Chinese
H	7	All 'Other Bumiputeras': 3 Sino Kadazan, 1 Kelabit Kadazan, 1 Iban Bidayuh, 1 Sabahan Dusun, 1 Melanau
I	6	5 Chinese, 1 Sino Kadazan
J	7	3 Malays, 4 Chinese
K	6	All Malays
L	6	5 Malays, 1 Chinese
M	6	All Chinese
Total	**82**	**34 Malays, 22 Chinese, 16 Indians, 10 Other Bumiputeras**

Table 3.3 shows the demographic breakdown of focus group respondents based on their state of origin. It shows that most of them hail from the states of Johor, Sabah and Selangor, which is congruent with the distribution of Malaysian population by state. As the 2010 census reported, 19.6% of residents come from Selangor, 11.8% live in Johor while 11.6% are in Sabah (Saw 2015). The other states in Malaysia house less than 10% of total residents. In spite of the respondents' diverse backgrounds, the findings reveal that the states that they hail from bear little influence on their interpretations of the films.

Table 3.3: Demographic Breakdown of Respondents Based On State of Origin

State	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total Respondents
Johor	16	16.7
Kedah	2	2.1
Kelantan	5	5.2
Melaka	3	3.2
Negeri Sembilan	2	2.1
Pahang	6	6.3
Penang	4	4.2
Perak	8	8.3
Perlis	1	1.0
Sabah	12	12.5
Sarawak	9	9.4
Selangor	24	25
Terengganu	4	4.2
Total	**96**	**100**

Table 3.4 below shows the distribution of respondents based on whether they come from a rural or urban area. The definition of an urban area varies across countries. For the purpose of this research, I adopt Saw's (2015) definition, which generally refers to urban centres or gazetted areas and their adjoining built-up environment that holds 10,000 or more inhabitants, and where the populations are able to benefit from the vibrant economic activities in the premier sites. The proportion of students coming from urban centres, which is 72 out of 96 students, or 75% of the population, is close to the proportion of residents living in urban areas as captured in the 2010 census, which is 71% (Saw 2015). Just like the respondents' states of origin, the type of dwelling that they grew up in does not bear any significance on my study. Rather, as the findings will show later, it is their ethnic sensibilities, as well as religious, classed and gendered subjectivities that have greater impacts on their filmic engagement.

Table 3.4: Demographic Breakdown of Respondents Based On Geographical Distribution

Geographical Distribution	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total Respondents
Urban area	72	75
Rural area	24	25
Total	**96**	**100**

3.3.2.2 Challenges in Recruitment

A challenge that I faced during the interview recruitment process was that of recruiting Malay female participants for focus group interviews. Ironic as it may seem given their omnipresence on both campuses, the highest attrition rate I encountered was among female Malay undergraduates. As many as four groups that I recruited, majority of whom were Malay women, did not meet me eventually although I did maintain regular contact with them throughout the recruitment period. Response was generally slow across all four groups and only a few members responded to my messages. The fact that their course mates from other groups who were taking the same courses as them replied to my messages was a cause for concern and challenged my assumption that assignments could be keeping them busy. This was in stark contrast to male and female Indian interlocutors who showed great enthusiasm in wanting to be recruited in the interviews. The Indian students were so proactive in calling upon their Indian friends to participate in the research that I had to decline a number of them out of concern of over-recruitment. There was even a group of Indians who went to the extent of rescheduling their project meeting just so that they could make it for the interview.

The challenge of recruiting Malay female students reiterates the point made by some scholars about how fieldwork may not be a linear process and that may lead to unexpected outcomes (Palmer *et. al.* 2014). Nonetheless, I did not view this as a necessary limitation of the research but rather, something that needs to be unpacked as it can inadvertently or not, explain any patterns that emerge out of the findings. In accounting for the unsuccessful recruitment of the Malay students, several questions

are worth asking: What could explain the lack of and lag in response towards my 'Whatsapp' messages among these students? On the other hand, why was the recruitment of other Malay respondents successful? And finally, what factors may account for the overzealousness of the Indian participants? In seeking to answer the first question, I analysed my flow of 'Whatsapp' conversations with the students. A close examination of the conversations revealed very brief responses from the Malay female students. Acknowledgements were often merely marked with 'Whatsapp' emoticons, such as the thumbs-up sign. Subsequent messages were left unanswered. Ultimately, the interviews did not materialise.

Unlike this experience, I had a free-flowing exchange of 'Whatsapp' conversations with the other female Malay students whom I had recruited successfully. My interaction with the latter students, as well as an examination of their profiles, indicate that these students have many non-Malay friends and are conversant in English, the main language of communication I used in my Whatsapp conversations with them. These students were of major assistance to me in the recruitment of non-Malay students from Groups G and H in Table 3.2 above. Thus, the lack of competency to use English by the other Malay students could possibly explain why the other female students withdrew from participation. This realisation only came about at the end of the fieldwork after taking into account my entire experience of being in the field, which affirms the presumption that Malay is the dominant language used by most Malaysian students, be it among Malay students or between Malays and non-Malays. Not only are the non-Malays comfortable in using Malay in their day-to-day communication with their friends and lecturers, they are conversant with the language as well. With Malay being the official language of the country, and the lack of government enforcement of English as a medium of instruction in schools despite recognising its value account for the students' Malay language proficiency. Having grown up in Singapore where English is commonly used by the younger generation when communicating with people from different ethnicities, and even among those from the same ethnicity, I was in awe when listening to the non-Malay students spoke in fluent Malay. Likewise, they were equally amazed when they learnt that I could speak Malay, as they were under the impression that English is the only medium of communication in Singapore.

What then could account for the successful recruitment of the Indian and Malay male students? In my interviews with them, these students sounded very passionate when discussing the Bumiputera policy, which give special privileges to the Malays and indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak. Almost every Indian student I interviewed felt that they have been marginalised by this policy. As for the Malay students, they thought that the films tend to exaggerate the better-off position of the Bumiputeras and gloss over their varied experiences, such as how certain lower-income Malay families are not entitled to these privileges, which resonated with many of their personal experiences. Like the female Malays, the male Malay students also responded briefly to my text messages. Nonetheless, they were more forthcoming in clarifying with me whether the interview was going to be conducted in Malay or English, as they felt more comfortable conversing in the former, to which I was open to either option, as I had prepared the interview questions in both languages. Thus, this validates my speculation that English language incompetency, and possibly reticence, might be the reasons why the female Malay students were not eager to participate. It was only after reflecting on the entire experience, from the process of recruiting the students to analysing what each of my informant had said, that I surmise that language barrier was a drawback that explains why some interviews did not materialise. The strong compulsion to use the interview as an opportunity to share with me about their plight and concerns was also what motivated the respondents, especially the Indians, to participate in my research.

3.3.3 On-Site Observations

I contend that it is also important for researchers who conduct fieldwork to spend time at the field site long enough to carry out extensive fieldwork, and to immerse himself or herself in the local environment. My fieldwork experience was not limited to interviewing participants only but also extended beyond the confines of the discussion room. I made an effort to be on campus even on days when I did not have any interview scheduled in order to gain some insider perspectives. I regularly spent several hours at various sites on campus including the university cafeterias, libraries and student lounges observing the students' activities and how they socialised with one another. I also grabbed any opportunities to have meals on campus with my

respondents whenever invited. I wrote extensive field notes in a notebook as I factored in my fieldwork impressions from the onsite observations.

3.3.4 Film Screening

With the assistance of my lecturer-friends and some respondents, I booked discussion rooms on campus to conduct both the film screening and interviewing. The important aspects to consider in the selection of the venue were privacy, comfort and quietness (King and Horrocks 2010). During the pilot study in March 2015, I assigned all focus groups to watch one feature film entitled '*Gadoh*', or 'Fight', of 75 minutes long, and a short film called '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*' ('ACDB') (Torn Between Love and Ethnic Identity) of 5 minutes long. I chose these films, as their combined duration seems reasonably long for the students to watch in one sitting, followed by an interview that lasted for about another one and a half hours or so. Moreover, they are comprehensive in representing similar issues that are featured across all other films in the filmography, which tend to focus on only one or two major themes. '*Gadoh*' centres on inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia whereas 'ACDB' focuses on inter-ethnic romance while concurrently complicating inter-ethnic relations. However, based on the feedback garnered from the interviewees, 'ACDB' was too short and ambiguous for them to grasp the intended message. In view of this feedback, and the consideration for comprehensiveness of cross-cutting themes, I showed all focus group respondents '*Gadoh*' and Yasmin Ahmad's '*Sepet*' instead for my actual fieldwork.

Although the issues examined in these films are by no means exhaustive, I have chosen them due to a number of reasons. First, they contain substantive themes on ethnicity, racism and multi-ethnicity that are commonly debated in the public and political spheres, and that enable a sustained audience discourse of these issues. Their problematisation of significant public and policy debates is evident through such themes as fairness of the *bumiputera* policy and dietary requirements as a marker of ethnic boundaries. While '*Gadoh*' is more upfront in its depiction of ethnic stereotypes, '*Sepet*' is less subtle about its problematisation of ethnic issues. Nonetheless, both films cast light on major inter-ethnic issues in contemporary Malaysia.

Second, the films' settings are relevant to the students' lives. '*Gadoh*' is filmed in a high school environment where students from the three major ethnicities in Malaysia come into contact with one another every day. In a parallel narrative, it also features the students' upbringing as well as their socialisation activities beyond their school environment. Similarly, the inter-ethnic romantic relationship in '*Sepet*' involves characters who are at a crossroad of their lives where they are confronted with critical choices, such as having to find a life partner. As such, these films offer the students narratives that they can resonate with, even though they may not necessarily agree with the depictions.

Third, the films do not belong to the category of 'mainstream films' as widely understood in Malaysia. The cast and filmmakers are multi-ethnic, and the script is effectively multi-lingual. Both films were also produced and distributed through 'underground' means. '*Sepet*' was self-funded and not financed by a big, mainstream studio (Baumgartel 2012). It obtained the green light to be screened on national channels only after eight cuts were made of scenes deemed controversial, and after it had clinched top accolades at international film festivals (Baumgartel 2012). Likewise, according to Shahili Adnan or also known as Nam Ron, the director of '*Gadoh*' whom I met at his 'AyaqHangat' theatre studio in Damansara during my fieldwork to obtain insights on the film, the film was intentionally produced as an 'underground' film by Pusat Komas, a human rights organisation that supports marginalised grassroots communities and non-governmental organisations in Malaysia. This was done in order to bypass the National Censorship Board that would have otherwise banned the film due to its ethnicised content. '*Gadoh*' was then uploaded on 'You Tube' and screened to university students at several Malaysian universities. At the time of writing, Pusat Komas is still screening this film to secondary students at various locations in Malaysia even after almost a decade has passed since its production.

It is this very nature of both films as a form of alternative media that make them appropriate for my research. Bailey and Harindranath (2006) have argued that the utilisation of alternative media in 'multi-ethnic public sphericules' can foster cross-cultural communication and understanding between minority and majority ethnic

groups on what constitutes shared values and rights. It provides ethnic minorities with the opportunity to engage with the mainstream public sphere, and majority groups with the chance to address the marginalisation of minority communities. Borrowing from Habermas's (1992) concept of 'public spheres', which he argues are able to counter hegemonic views propagated by mainstream media, Gitlin (1998) asserts that 'public sphericules' in multi-ethnic societies are able to do likewise through the active intervention of "ethnic-diasporic media spheres" that emerge in response to the demands of ethnic minorities for social and political inclusion (Bailey and Harindranath 2006:307). Thus, screening the films '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*' would provide me with the opportunity to explore how Malaysian students engage with inter-ethnic themes in non-mainstream films, a subject that receives scant scholarly attention in the literature on the attitudes of young audience towards inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia.

Prior to the film screening, I issued informed consent forms to all participants in both English and Malay. In the forms, I highlighted that the purpose of the interview was solely for research and the information obtained would not be distributed elsewhere without their consent. I also assured participants that pseudonyms would be used throughout my dissertation to protect their confidentiality. Lastly, those who were not willing to take part could opt out of the research. Once I confirmed that the participants understood their role and objectives of the research, I requested for them to sign the forms, which were then returned to me to be kept for reference. I also distributed a set of forms in which they could fill in their personal profile and tick the Malaysian films with inter-ethnic themes that they have watched before from the filmography in Appendix A. Overall, most of the films that they have watched are the same ones that I have watched for the purpose of this research. The more popular ones include 'The Journey', '*Nasi Lemak* 2.0', '*Sembilu* 2005', '*Embun*', and those directed by the late Yasmin Ahmad, notably '*Muallaf*', '*Gubra*' and '*Sepet*' (Appendix B).

During the film screening, I let the participants watch the films without interrupting them at any point of the sessions. I observed their reactions to the films and how they engaged with one another. As studies on audience reception have demonstrated, film viewing is not merely an act of engagement with an audio-visual text but "also about

the people with whom the experience is shared, as well as the moment in time and place in which it occurs" (Aveyard and Moran 2013:11). Indeed, the students were active viewers who would clarify their doubts with their friends and who were expressive in responding to certain scenes and dialogues. Some even jotted down notes during the screening, which was a positive indication that they were taking the activity seriously and understood the significance of the exercise.

3.3.4.1 Challenges in Film Screening

In my initial encounters with the first few groups, I met each group once. The total duration of my meeting with each group normally lasted for four-and-a-half hours, which included three hours of film screening followed by one-and-a-half hours of interviewing. After these encounters, I realised that the activities were very time-consuming and involved a huge commitment on the respondents' part, which made me appreciate their effort tremendously in making time for the interview despite their hectic schedules. In two of the groups interviewed, a few respondents had to leave early due to school commitments. To overcome this challenge, I decided to meet each group on two separate occasions for my subsequent interviews. The first session involved watching one film, followed by an interview based on the film. The second session involved the same activities based on the second film. This would ensure that each meeting with them would not exceed two and a half hours yet at the same time, enabled me to get the most out of the interviews.

Meeting them twice was also useful in helping me to establish rapport with them from the first interview, and to obtain a sense of the group dynamics. These are especially important, as my pilot study has shown that having a group where the participants knew one another did not necessarily lead to an engaging discussion. Even though at the start of the interview, I had encouraged them to participate actively in the discussion by agreeing or disagreeing with their group members' views and by commenting on one another's points whenever they felt relevant, they were merely responding to my questions individually instead of engaging with one another's ideas. I attribute their discomfort to having me around as an outsider. Hence, the initial interviews made me realise the importance of breaking the ice with them prior to conducting the interview, and of creating an informal setting where they felt

comfortable to let an 'outsider' observe how they would communicate with one another.

3.3.5 Focus Group Interviewing

Immediately after the film screening, I played the role of moderator in all focus groups. Before every interview, I would ask the participants about the language that they felt most comfortable using, to which majority, including the non-Malays, opted for Malay. Having prepared two sets of interview questions, one in English and another in Malay, I used them accordingly based on the interviewees' preference. Where necessary, I code-switched between English and Malay. This is an important consideration, as language incompetency may be a barrier for participants to take part effectively in the research process (Koulouriotis 2011). I also established some ground rules so that every participant was aware of the format and objectives of the discussion. All the interviews were audio-recorded for transcription purpose.

My interview questions gathered a combination of qualitative and quantitative responses. The series of open-ended questions that I posed to the participants allowed them to express themselves freely with one another. These include questions pertaining to schooling, friendship and dating. The effectiveness of this technique has been proven by the work of Jhally and Lewis (1992) on audience reception of 'The Cosby Show', which shows that non-interruption by the interviewer in a focus group enables a rich data to be gathered by allowing the conversation to flow freely at appropriate moments. Additionally, my interviews included some likert-scaled questions that enabled me to quantify their responses one-by-one. I avoided the use of academic jargons that may not be comprehensible to the laypersons. Overall, the interviews intended to explore the following: their general thoughts on the films, how they linked inter-ethnic relations and politics featured in the films to their daily lives, their attitudes towards inter-ethnic relations vis-à-vis contemporary social discourses, and how they negotiate state policies on multi-ethnicity in their interactions with Malaysians of other ethnicities. I started most of the interviews with broad questions in order to set the interview tone and pace, such as "What do think of the film?" or "Tell me about your experience in high school." The richness of the data as the

interviews developed reassured me that I had successfully created a comfortable interview climate.

In consideration of the intersectional framework that I am working in, I have treated the interviewees' responses as narratives to uncover how the respondents negotiate their ethnic, class and gender identities. Using interviewees' stories as a means to assess cultural meanings have proven to be an important resource in works that interrogate how people make sense of their everyday lives at the intersections of their social identities. This includes Wilkins's (2012) research that explores how black college women tell stories about inter-ethnic relationships between black men and white women. Borrowing from Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) notion that researchers should treat interviews not just as an opportunity to have a glimpse of the participants' lived experience but as a means through which the latter actively construct and deconstruct their stories to give meaning to their selves, Wilkins regard the stories told by her interviewees as both social products and socially productive (Wilkins 2012:175). Taking this line of inquiry further, I treat my interviews, particularly the focus group discussions, as a dynamic interpersonal process in which the participants create meanings through their stories not just based on their personal accounts but also through their interaction and negotiation with others.

The interviews typically lasted for about 1 hour 30 minutes. This time format has been prescribed by Seidman (2013:24) because most of his past participants appreciated this duration, as it is not too long for them to sit at one time but long enough to "make them feel that they are being taken seriously." However, I practised flexibility when subscribing to this format since at times, new insights emerged from participants beyond the stipulated period, which necessitated the extension of the interview. In most cases, extension was not required.

Overall, majority of the informants were forthcoming in their inputs and I personally found the interviews productive and engaging. Most of the interviews went so well that at the end of them, some of the informants approached me to inform me that they enjoyed the discussions and were glad to have been given opportunities like this to express their opinions about a topic they have felt strongly about. For all of the informants, this was the first time that they were engaging in a discussion about inter-

ethnic relations in Malaysia, as they were not aware of other platforms to do so on or off campus. Although students from both universities are required to take a compulsory module titled '*Hubungan Etnik*' or 'Ethnic Relations', which they enjoyed given its informative content, it did not give them much opportunities to discuss and problematise ethnic issues from their perspectives, as the content was very much didactic. Moreover, many of them were curious to know my educational background, the sort of lifestyle I have in Singapore, and whether or not racism exists in Singapore, which pointed to the excellent rapport that was built throughout the interview process. Some even offered to show me around KL and many of them have become my friends and maintain contact with me until now. There were also those who showed genuine interest in my research topic and requested for a copy of my filmography so that they could watch those films that they have not seen before during their leisure time.

3.3.6 Individual Interviewing

The individual interviews were aimed at tackling the same research questions as the focus group discussions. As such, a similar set of questions was used. Prior to the interviews, I assigned all individual interviewees to watch the same two compulsory films, '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*'. Each interview typically lasted for about 1hour 30 minutes. Altogether, I interviewed a total of 14 individual interviewees.

3.3.7 Secondary Data

In addition to primary data, I evaluated a range of secondary data to gain insights into scholarly and popular interpretations of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysian films. Based on the corpus of relevant literature, several Malaysian and non-Malaysian academics have analysed the representations of ethnicity in films, with some engaging in in-depth analyses of this theme more than others. Their works have informed my understanding of the development of the Malaysian film industry and the issues related to inter-ethnic relations. Apart from evaluating academic literature, I engaged with textual analyses of film magazines, filmmakers' blogs, activist-centred websites, as well as online reviews of films. Secondary data analyses prove useful in forming

the basis of my findings about the representation and reception of ethnic politics in Malaysian films.

3.4 Data Analysis

Due to the multiple methods adopted for the study, I used different strategies to analyse the data. First, I keyed in the profile of respondents in Microsoft Excel based on the information provided in the demographic form in which they were asked to document their personal particulars, such as state of origin, course of study, and combined household income. I then transcribed all in-depth interviews using Microsoft Word. I also factored in the non-verbal cues in the transcriptions, such as body language and facial expressions of the participants. For the analysis of interviews, I adopted an inductive coding process when allowing common themes to emerge before categorising the responses into a range of broad and specific themes. My main categories were comments on "inter-ethnic relations", "racism", "educational policies", "class inequalities", "gender politics", and "inter-ethnic romance". Bearing in mind the intersectional paradigm that forms the framework of my analysis, I paid attention to how social identities like ethnicity, class and gender are mutually constituted instead of treating them as discrete categories of analysis.

I then adopted a quantitative approach by recording the measurable data in numerical form to help me identify any convergent or divergent patterns that emerged from the responses. Finally, data analysis involves synthesising my content analysis of the films, respondents' profile, textual analysis of transcribed interviews and considering fieldwork impressions. I compared the findings derived from various methods of inquiry and found most of them to be congruent with one another. When in doubt, I contacted my interviewees again to clarify their responses.

Due to the space that this dissertation affords, I will begin all discussions on the major themes that are featured in '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*' since these are the films that all the research participants have watched during the film screening sessions. I will discuss other films where relevant and where they share any one of the major themes portrayed in these two films. Priority was given to those films that at least one-third of the respondents have already watched for a sustained discussion of the films.

3.5 Research Ethics and Research Positionality

I was conscious of ethical considerations throughout the research process. In view of the assertion of some scholars that the ethics concerning human subjects is deeply contextualised (Homan 1992; King *et. al*. 1999), I subscribe to the belief and practice that my moral obligation as a researcher does not begin and end with the respondent signing the informed consent form (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). As my research has shown, issuing the forms alone is insufficient in making some respondents fully aware of their role in the research. As such, whenever respondents sought clarification regarding how I plan to use the data after the interview, I provided them with a detailed explanation of the dissertation writing process and what I hope to achieve at the end of the research.

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) have highlighted that one growing ethical concern for researchers is the recruitment of respondents from the Internet, especially social networking sites, as it raises issues of privacy and informed consent. While recruitment through the Internet did not apply to me, I acknowledge that the influence of social networking sites like 'Facebook' can complicate ethical considerations. As stated above, most of my respondents have ended up becoming my friends. 'Facebook' is one way in which we maintain contact with one another. At times, their online postings regarding political commentaries on ethnic issues in their country that were not mentioned during the interviews make a tempting study ground to draw links between them and my findings. While Moreno *et. al.* (2008) argue that researchers may readily use the information available on such sources due to their presence in the public domain, what constitute 'public' and 'private' especially on sites like 'Facebook' are open to contestation. Furthermore, I felt that it would be unethical to betray my respondents' trust by including information beyond what was gained during the interview, as this was not stated in the consent form.

Alongside scholars from various social science disciplines who place great emphasis on being reflexive in qualitative research (England 1994; O'Brien 2011), I also took into careful consideration issues of reflexivity in my study. I subscribe to Evans and King's definition of reflexivity as, "[being] aware of our assumptions and prejudices and taking into account the ways in which they might influence our research" (Evans

and King 2006:120). England (1994) further argues that this is important, as being critical about the researcher's own positionality, that is, position based on such social categories as ethnicity, class and gender, would produce more inclusive methodologies that attend to the power relations intrinsic in fieldwork.

Bearing this in mind, my research activities as an ethnic Malay researcher from Singapore warrant a reflection on positionality issues. In my experience, sharing the same "common ground" of ethnicity as some of the interviewees did not offer me sufficient basis for establishing immediate rapport with them. Despite sharing the same ethnicity as my Malay interviewees, I initially encountered several barriers with some of them, the most prominent one being language barrier. As alluded to earlier, English is increasingly becoming the main language of communication among young Singaporeans. As a Singaporean, English is the language that I will commonly use when conversing with my Singaporean friends regardless of their ethnicity. Although some of the interviewees informed me that they were open to using a mix of English and Malay in the beginning of the interview, I noticed that many appeared befuddled when I asked them questions in English even though I did not use any technical terms. One indication of this lack of comprehension was when members of the group who were more proficient in English translated my question into Malay for their friends following a moment of awkward silence. Upon realising that language barrier might hamper efforts to gain as much insights from my interviewees as possible, and that those who lacked proficiency in English might feel inferior to the rest, I immediately used the interview guide in Malay, relied on this throughout the interview process and responded to them in Malay. Therefore, while sharing some ethnic conventions with my Malay respondents, there were still barriers that I had to overcome.

This reiterates the dominant view on qualitative interviewing practice within the social sciences that is adopted by qualitative researchers in the mid-1990s, which rejected the positivist stance that failed to consider the interview as a "contextualised social product" (O'Brien 2011:73). The position of interview researchers studying ethnicity during the positivist period was that interview respondents should be interviewed by researchers of the same ethnicity, which reflected the dominant view held by researchers from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s that ethnicity does matter. Following this period, this view was challenged due to the assumption that sharing the

same ethnic background with the respondent does not necessarily enable the researcher to have the most ideal rapport with the former (O'Brien 2011).

Another barrier that I faced was the difference in nationalities between me and my respondents. Knowing that I am a Singaporean, some respondents were initially reluctant to discuss certain issues with me when questions related to racism in Malaysia were posed to them because, to quote one interviewee, "I do not want to go into this because I should not be speaking bad about my country even though it (racism) exists". Before the start of every interview, I read a standard script to assure the interviewees that I would be using pseudonyms to protect their identity, that the whole objective of the interview was for research purpose, and hence, I was more interested in their personal views rather than answers deemed "politically correct". Even so, that was not enough to convince them.

Therefore, upon realising that the desire to paint a rosy picture of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia to an outsider would not elicit truthful responses from interviewees, I employed Rodriquez's interviewing technique, which is to "[activate] a racialised subject" (Dunbar *et. al.* 2003:43). Rodriquez's experience of interviewing an African American male university student with whom she does not share common ethnicity and gender is illuminating. In the climate of the dominant colour-blind discourse in America that often questions people of colour who problematise racism, labelling them as unpatriotic, lazy and so on, people of colour are reluctant to discuss racism openly especially in the company of Whites (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Thus, when realising that her respondent felt uneasy when sharing his experience of ethnic discrimination, Rodriquez used the technique of self-disclosure by sharing her own experiences in graduate school facing discrimination as a Latina in order to encourage him to be candid about his ethnicised experiences. This climate of insecurity is similar to the Malaysian case where ethnicity has been socially constructed as a taboo topic in the spirit of striving for "ethnic harmony" in the country, and where questioning the privileges of the Bumiputeras is outlawed.

In subscribing to Rodriquez's technique, I made a conscious effort to activate ethnicity during the interviews and to avoid the pitfall where the topic is avoided altogether, which would otherwise defeat the whole purpose of conducting the

discussion. For example, I offered interpretations of ethnic politics by sharing with them my experience of facing ethnic discrimination as the only Malay student in a Chinese-dominated class in my secondary school, which indicates to the respondent that I do not share the current and popular colour-blind stance that generally seeks to overlook ethnic differences and what Velayutham and Wise (2009) would term "everyday racism", which is still prevalent in the society I am brought up in. This attempt to achieve "empathetic insideness" with the respondents proved successful as they subsequently became more willing to engage in topics related to racism and ethnic discrimination (Relph 1976).

Even though this technique may seem to challenge the traditional "protocol" in an interview where the interviewer is advised against asking the interviewee "leading" questions in order to prompt for desired responses, I concur with O'Brien (2011:80) when she contends that "… when we conceive of the interview as an active co-creation between interviewer and interviewee, we can become more cognizant of the ways in which the subject is hardly led or misled, but instead makes active choices of his or her own". In many cases, I found my respondents actively engaging with my examples. For instance, they would inform me that either they or their friends share the same experience. Otherwise, they would deny going through that experience. Hence, by encouraging the respondents to share their thoughts on the given examples and not exaggerating those examples, the technique should not be conceived as necessarily leading the respondent.

This affirms my theoretical stance of this study on the importance of creating safe spaces for respondents to discuss and problematise issues deemed sensitive without having insecurities that they would sound racist. I define 'safe space' as the creation of an environment where both the interviewer and respondents respect one another's views, as well as adopt an open attitude towards the discussion of "taboo" issues. It also entails providing respondents with the assurance that they can offer critiques of racist policies and treatments, and express their views freely in the presence of both members and non-members of their ethnic groups. This is exemplified by my discussion with Group G, where a respondent tried to avoid using the word 'lazy' when making references to the film '*Gadoh*' out of fear that it might insult his Malay

friends. Laziness is a stereotypical attribute given to the Malays. As highlighted in the following excerpt, where 'Nick' is Chinese and 'Mia' is Malay:

> Me: What are your thoughts on '*Gadoh*'?
>
> Nick: This film is true in Malaysia, what we face in our daily life. This film reflects what happened in my secondary school where there are two gangs, Malays and Chinese. They always fight. The Malays will insult the Chinese, like calling Chinese '*babi*' (pig). The Chinese will insult the Malays… (hesitates)… They say Malays are like that. Like… (pause)
>
> Me: Malays are like what? (Twitches eyebrows) It's ok. Just say it. We Malays are cool about it.
>
> Mia: (chips in) Yeah Nick, just say. I'm open also.
>
> Nick: Erm. Lazy *lah*. Haha. (followed by laughter from the rest)

Thus, the above conversation reiterates the importance of myself as the researcher to facilitate a discussion where respondents were provided with the space and opportunity to learn from the process of dialogue, which requires deconstructing the boundaries of what can or cannot be a subject of public debate and discourse. Just like many other topics that I raised in the interview, common stereotypes like the Malay disinclination to work are deemed sensitive because they have been invoked in government and public discourses in ways that incite hatred among the ethnicities (Milner *et. al.* 2014). Therefore, through the open discussions I had with all the groups, beyond increasing their awareness of *why* it is important to confront differences, I have also made them learn *how* to deal with difficult issues that were previously considered taboo to them. First, I have made them realise that the form of *language* in which they use to articulate their views and concerns is what sets a mature discussion apart from one where there is animosity and lack of mutual understanding between distinct groups. Second, I have also helped them to differentiate between discussing stereotypes in a manner that *perpetuates* them, and raising them in order to pave the way towards *dismantling* them. Finally, the discussion itself was an effective way to demonstrate to them how an open discussion would work through the medium of films, that is, by serving as a platform to thinking about ethnic issues. In so doing, I hope to have made a contribution to larger efforts

that are aimed at encouraging Malaysians to bring their differences to the fore, in its most rigorous form.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that it is significant to engage in a combination of research methods in order to gain a deeper understanding of the contemporary discourses on inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. Extending Staiger's (1991) emphasis on the context of interpretation as discussed in Chapter 2 to include ethnographic research, I have shown that it is equally important to go beyond textual analyses to understand what kinds of meanings the audience subscribes to when it comes to interpreting the narratives, themes, scenes and dialogues in the films.

In addition, one needs to consider the entire process of fieldwork for a comprehensive analysis of data. This includes factoring in fieldwork impressions, strategies and challenges in recruiting respondents, as well as the conversations with the interviewees after the interview sessions had ended. With regard to research methods, I have highlighted the role of technology, such as smart phone applications, in influencing research, which is an overlooked area within the literature review on research methodology. I have also demonstrated the effectiveness of the interviewing method in reconstructing previously held knowledge about inter-ethnic relations. In reminding us that ethnicity is a social construction that is embedded in our social relations, O'Brien (2011:90) captures it succinctly when she argues:

> "Because an interview itself is a profoundly social process, it has the potential both to illuminate our understandings about ethnicity but also to obscure that knowledge if the interviewer approaches that interaction in a colour-blind manner (as if ethnicity doesn't matter) *or* in an essentialist manner (as if ethnicity can be boiled down to a simple question of matching interviewer and interviewee's ethnicity for maximum reliability)."

Ultimately, failure to attend to the audience's perspectives may result in what some social scientists call "armchair research", which involves interpreting data without

sufficient onsite observations (Katz 1994). As my findings would later prove, the research methods are not merely a route to gathering data; they *are* the findings themselves. The film screening session, focus group interviews and individual interviews all offered a glimpse of ethnic politics in contemporary Malaysia in their own ways. By cross-examining the data derived from both primary and secondary sources, I will structure the subsequent chapters based on how the undergraduates' ethnicity is positioned vis-à-vis the dimensions of religious (or non-religious) affiliations (Chapter 4), social class (Chapter 5) and gender backgrounds (Chapter 6). It is to the questions of the extent to which these social determinants inform their articulations of inter-ethnic themes in the films, and the ways in which these interpretations reflect the impacts of the current context of Islamisation on their day-to-day multi-ethnic relations with other Malaysians that the dissertation will now turn.

CHAPTER 4

Young People's Interpretations of Inter-Ethnic and Inter-Religious Themes in Malaysian Films

4.1 Introduction

Ethnicity is strongly identified with religion in Malaysia. All Malays are required to profess the Islamic faith by law. The close association between ethnicity and religion is also observable among the Chinese and Indians, for whom the dominant religions are Buddhism and Hinduism respectively, with each accounting for 76.0 per cent and 84.1 per cent of the ethnic populations based on the 2010 Census reports (Saw 2015). Despite the close entwinement between ethnicity and religion, the current literature of ethnicity and religion in the country do not adequately explain how different ethnic and religious groups negotiate the mutual constitution of these two identities in their everyday relations. Current works in the Malaysian context construct ethnic and religious categories only as instruments of political mobilisation (Gomez 2007; Liow 2009). A major line of research shows how ethnic Malay elites appropriate Islam as a political tool to strengthen Malay hegemony in the competition among the different ethnicities (Nagata 1980; Kamarulnizam 2003). Judith Nagata was among the early researchers who first noted the appropriation of religion as a political instrument to serve ethnic politics. In her observation of how ethnic identity markers like language and customs have become blurred over time, Judith Nagata asserts that: "Malay[ness] no longer provides a sufficient distinction between Malays and non-Malays as a basis for ethnic identity. The erosion of the first two elements of 'Malayness'- language and *adat* (Malay custom) has left only one effective distinguishing feature- Islam" (Nagata 1980:409). Another strand of research emphasises that individuals would necessarily construct their subjectivities based on one mode of identification and not the other (Daniels 2013; Dahlia 2014). In most of the latter works, ethnicity is understood to bear secondary importance to religion in the process of identity formation. The way in which such research regards one identity as more salient than the other is problematic especially in cases where ethnic and religious subjectivities are manifested simultaneously.

As opposed to these studies, this chapter explores how these two markers may intersect with each other in the respondents' narratives. The role of religion in works that employ intersectionality as a framework has not been adequately explored as opposed to other social dimensions like ethnicity, class and gender. Alongside the few recent works by scholars like Singh (2015) and Weber (2015), which have called for the incorporation of religion as a category of analysis in order to enrich discussions on intersectionality, this chapter focuses on how intersectionality can be conceptualised in a way that simultaneously attends to both ethnicity and religion. Based on the assumption that the respondents will appropriate existing symbolic representations and identifications of ethnicity and religion in their interpretations of inter-ethnic themes in selected films, this chapter asks: In what ways, if at all, are ethnic and religious subjectivities interwoven in the respondents' narratives? More broadly, how would an intersectional analysis of ethnicity and religion enrich our understanding of the ways in which they negotiate the structural impacts of state-sponsored Islamisation on their day-to-day inter-ethnic relations? The chapter seeks to answer these questions through a discussion of three major inter-ethnic themes that are featured in '*Gadoh*' and the films directed by Yasmin Ahmad, specifically '*Sepet*', '*Gubra*', '*Muallaf*' and '*Talentime*'. These films have been chosen because they contain overt and/or covert depictions of one or more of the following themes: markers of ethnic differentiation that have contributed to ethnic tensions in the country, notably the issue of pork, which has been a point of contention between the local Malays and Chinese (Section 4.2), inter-faith relations (Section 4.3), and inter-ethnic romance (Section 4.4). While the first theme is portrayed in both '*Gadoh*' and Yasmin's films, the latter two are more specific to Yasmin's films. Where relevant, other films that share these common themes will be discussed as well.

The findings were garnered from a total of 96 respondents of whom 43 were Muslims, 18 were Buddhists, 14 were Hindus, 13 were Christians, 5 were Taoists and 3 were atheists. Of the 43 who were Muslims, 40 were Malays, 2 were Indians and 1 was of Melanau ethnicity. This chapter argues that an intersectional analysis of the respondents' narratives, which examines the mutual constitutions of ethnicity and religion at the micro level can better elucidate how the average Malaysian negotiate inter-ethnic relations in their everyday lives. By suffusing religious subjectivities with ethnic meanings, and appropriating ethnic markers to highlight religious concerns,

and vice-versa, their narratives reiterate the relation between the two social configurations in the processes of subject formation. In so doing, the respondents show that their ethnic and religious subjectivities are not necessarily informed by state ideologies that conceptualise religion as an essence of ethnic identity.

4.2 Food Items as Markers of Ethnic Difference

This section explores the interviewees' attitudes towards the discourse on Islamically permissible food, or 'halal' food. One way in which Muslims perform their religious piety is through the consumption of halal products. In principle, food and drinks that are halal cannot contain any ingredients that fall under the categories of impurity outlined in the *sharia* or Islamic law. Any item found to be contaminated by prohibited elements is considered *haram*. Although the traditional halal requirements have been extended to non-food items, ranging from clothing, music and entertainment to services like Islamic education and finance (Muller 2014; Kamaludeen 2016), the main preoccupation on what constitutes halal in Malaysia is still on food.

Nonetheless, the traditional notions of halal consumption with regard to food have evolved over time. Recently, the notion of halal-ness has taken on a slightly different meaning. From the conventional conceptions of purity centred on ingredients and manufacturing process, the understanding of halal-ness now entails a complex meaning that is linked to the strengthening of a Muslim identity (Kamaludeen 2016). Food outlets in Malaysia selling items with names that are deemed to cause confusion among Muslim consumers, such as 'hot dogs', have been told to rename their products or risked being denied halal certification (BBC News 19th October 2016; Today Online 20th October 2016). According to the Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), a religious government body in Malaysia, the name hot dog cannot be linked to halal certification, as dogs are considered 'impure' in Islam. Malaysian local media reported that JAKIM has made it mandatory for food outlet operators to abort words linked to non-halal products, such as 'bacon', 'ham' and '*bak kut teh*', all of which are variants of pork, in order to qualify for halal certification (Free Malaysia Today 18th October 2016). This has caused fast food chain A&W to rename their

'Coney Dog' and 'Root Beer' to 'Chicken Coney' or 'Beef Coney' and 'RB', respectively. The naming issue emerged after an executive with US pretzel store franchise Auntie Anne's announced that their application for halal certification was turned down due to concerns over 'pretzel dogs' on their menu (BBC News 19th October 2016; Today Online 20th October 2016).

The reinforcement of Muslim religious identity through food consumption does not occur in isolation. In Malaysia, food has become an important signifier that defines Malay identity against other ethnic identities. While there are different types of food that are considered *haram*, pork has been central to the maintenance of ethnic boundary between the Chinese and Malays in Malaysia, as it is perceived to form a large part of the Chinese diet, as opposed to the Malays who avoid it altogether, as Islam forbids the consumption of pork. As ethnic identity is often "just as much a question of "who you are not" as "who you are" (Nagata 1975:3), pork has been a key symbol of ethnic differentiation between the Malays and Chinese. In fact, it is such a strong marker of difference that it has taken on political overtones. For instance, after winning the 2008 elections, Party Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), an Islamic political party in the state of Kelantan, proposed a ban on the sale of pork in the whole state (Tong 2006). This triggered uproar among the Chinese who regarded it as an attempt to impose Islamic values on non-Malays in Kelantan.

The state's institutionalisation of religion has resulted in many outcomes in the lived environment particularly in West Malaysia. One of which is the increased segregation of public eating spaces into halal and non-halal segments. This implies that the eateries are strongly demarcated along ethnic lines. Generally, Chinese *kopitiams* (Hokkien for 'coffee shop') belong to the latter category since they serve non-halal food. Even though there are Chinese *kopitiams* that serve halal Malay and Indian dishes (Duruz and Khoo 2015), they are an anomaly in the public dining landscape and are still identified as a Chinese eating space given the ambience that embody Chinese culture. Another outcome is the climate of hypersensitivity between members of the two ethnicities. For example, the Chinese will exercise precaution by not talking about pork in front of the Malays. Likewise, the Malays will generally over-react when they spot a Chinese person eating pork within their vicinity (Tong 2006). Malay aversion towards pork has been heightened following the discourse on active

dakwah or Islamic proselytization phase by the state in the 1980s following the NEP, which called for the integration of Islamic laws and values in public life. A consequence of this is the stricter observation of Islamic dietary requirements by Muslims and the attempts to make the country's food industry halal (Khoo 2009). The subject of pork is also often used to incite racism especially among the bigoted Malays and Chinese. Racist remark that is often hurled at the Chinese by the Malays is that "*Cina makan babi*" or "Chinese who consume pork" (Tong 2006:104).

The pork issue is problematised in films like '*Gadoh*', '*Sepet*', '*Gubra*' and '*Talentime*'. In '*Gadoh*', the directors bring across the issue through the scene where the Malays and Chinese students are asked to confront each other's differences during the theatre practice. When asked by the theatre instructor to voice out any pent-up emotions that they have towards other ethnicities, the distaste of the Malay students towards the Chinese because of the latter's pork diet emerges as one of the reasons why the former are so hostile towards the latter (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: A Malay student explains why he hates the Chinese during a theatre practice

The issue of pork is also evident in '*Sepet*' and '*Gubra*'. In '*Sepet*', a highly subversive scene occurs when Jason chooses to introduce Orked to his Chinese friends at a Chinese *kopitiam* that sells roast pork (Figure 4.2). Chinese coffee shops are common hangouts for the Chinese in Malaysia, for these shops are one of the few places that are allowed to sell pork openly in the country. Upon entering the coffee

shop and setting her eyes on the roast pork, Orked exclaims in Cantonese, "*Wah, ou hou mei ah*!" which is translated into "Wow, what a nice smell!" (Figure 4.3). This scene transgresses societal norms on several levels- the depiction of a Malay lady in a *baju kurung* (loose traditional Malay outfit) signifies transgression of ethnic boundaries, as the Malays in Peninsular Malaysia will avoid such place as it does not sell any halal food. On another level, showing her appreciation towards pork, a highly taboo food item in the Malay cultural and religious imagination is doubly subversive.

Figure 4.2: Orked meeting Jason and his Chinese friend, Keong (left) at a Chinese *kopitiam*

Figure 4.3: As Orked enters the Chinese *kopitiam*, she exclaims that the pork smells good

The pork issue is also raised in '*Gubra*', the sequel to '*Sepet*' that picks up Orked's story a few years after her relationship with Jason. In a scene at the hospital where Jason's father is warded, a Malay lady is seen offering Jason's mother a traditional Malay cuisine after the latter loudly exclaims about her husband's strong diet of pork

(Figure 4.4). Instead of taking offense at her comments, as some Malays would, the Malay lady offers her *rendang,* a popular Malay cuisine, as a symbol of tolerance and inter-cultural exchange, which is a common trademark of Yasmin's films.

Figure 4.4: In a scene from '*Gubra*', Alan's mother (right) apologises to the Malay lady after exclaiming about her husband's diet of pork, as she is afraid that the comment may have offended the latter.

In addition to the above films, 'Talentime' also makes subtle reference to the subject of pork. 'Talentime' tells the story of several high school students in Malaysia who are gearing up to take part in their school's talent competition. It centres on the romantic relationship between a student of Malay and British parentage, Melur, and her hearing-impaired schoolmate, Mahesh, who is an Indian. Concurrent narratives include snippets of the students' daily lives. In a scene where Melur's family hosts Datin Kalsum at their home, the pork issue is indirectly referred to when Datin Kalsum expresses her cynicism towards the family for employing Mei Ling, a Chinese worker as their domestic helper (Figure 4.5). As Datin Kalsum remarks, "I can never get over the fact that you have a *Cina* (Malay for Chinese) person cook for you. Aren't you worried what she might have touched before she comes around?" What Mei Ling might have touched refers to pork and dogs, the two items that are regarded as 'impure' by Malays. In response to this, Melur's youngest sister nonchalantly informs Datin Kalsum that Mei Ling owns five dogs. In the conversation that follows, Datin Kalsum exclaims that she cannot perform her daily prayer with the excuse that she has forgotten to bring along her prayer gown, after which Melur's sister offers hers. This juxtaposition of scenes serves as a satire to those Muslims who

are overly concerned about relatively micro issues that are perceived to affect their piety, such as the way their food is being prepared, but who do not observe their religious obligations.

Figure 4.5: Mei Ling, the Chinese domestic helper of Melur's family pours a drink for Datin Kalsum (centre) as the latter watches on

To interrogate how my interviewees relate to the discourse on pork, I asked for their views on the above scenes. Generally, the subject of pork is still so taboo especially among the Malay and Chinese interviewees from West Malaysia that they avoided the mere mention of the word altogether. Instead of using the word '*babi*' (pork) in the discussions, many of the non-Malays preferred to use '*khinzir*' instead, which is a more polite way of making reference to pork. My conversations with the students illustrate how the social construct of pork as a taboo subject has informed their interpretations of the pork scene in '*Sepet*'. Below is an excerpt from my interview with Group J. In the following interview, Ken is a Chinese Christian and Mila is a Malay Muslim.

Ken: It's quite strange when Orked was entering the Chinese *kopitiam* (Figure 4.3). This is very, very sensitive. Orked was saying in Cantonese that the roast pork smells good. But the Chinese customers must be wondering why is there a Muslim in a Chinese *kopitiam*? Why not go to a *halal* restaurant?

Me: What is so problematic about this? She could have just been there to order a canned drink.

Mila: Yeah but the culture is not like that. It's offensive to both Malays and Chinese. Like, would you enter a Chinese coffee shop that sells pork? (addressing the question to me)

Me: Well, if it's just to meet friends, why not?

Mila: I wouldn't. What would the Malays think when they see a *tudung* girl (lady in a headscarf) in a Chinese coffee shop?

In another interview, a Malay student, Syazni, validates the social pressure that Mila was articulating:

Me: Are you, like Orked in '*Sepet*', ok with meeting your friends at a coffee shop that sells pork?

Syazni: For me, I am ok with that. But to sit down and order a can of drink, that's a problem. People will already have a bad impression of you when they see you entering the coffee shop, what more drinking at the coffee shop. Because I have this fear. Even though I am open about it, I still have this fear.

Another Malay respondent, Fuad, articulated it this way:

I don't understand why Orked has to enter the coffee shop that sells pork. In Malaysia, there are so many stalls that sell all kinds of *halal* food. Yet she still chooses to meet Jason at a place that sells pork. At least, you know, be considerate to the Malays around her.

The above responses affirm works that highlight how Muslims in Malaysia cultivate a pious habitus. As Tong and Turner (2013) argue, the demand for Muslims to live piously does not only require the systematic practice of Islamic virtues, but also involves the existence of favourable conditions under which they can be realised (Tong and Turner 2013). More than just representations of their religious identity,

acts of piety embodied by Muslims in Malaysia are also manifested through their commitment to religious norms that differentiate themselves from non-Muslim lifestyle and practices. In the case of Malay female respondents like Mila, her headscarf serves as a reminder for her to behave in a religious manner in public spaces by observing the geographical boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia. The institutionalisation of these boundaries have become so normalised that even non-Muslims like Ken are aware of what constitutes a "pious habitus" for Muslims.

However, although their narratives may suggest that they lack the tolerance for multi-ethnic diversity, a close analysis of the above excerpts indicates that the aversion towards pork is merely symbolic. Their fears of eating at Chinese *kopitiams* are predicated upon individualised concerns about the consequences of transgressing societal norms rather than real accounts of tensions that are based on direct personal experience or reported cases of actual hostility that happen as a result of crossing cultural boundaries. These are exemplified by the comments of Mila and Syazni when they respectively commented: "What would the Malays think when they see a *tudung* girl in a Chinese coffee shop?" and "People will already have a bad impression of you when they see you entering the coffee shop". Thus, it is not that the respondents have anything against the Chinese community. Rather, they are more concerned about not exemplifiying 'ideal' Islamic piety as individual Muslims.

Despite the political and public discourse that construct food consumption as a potential ethnic divider, the respondents from West Malaysia have proven that consumption practices can also unite people from different ethnic groups. Their fear of entering Chinese coffee shops is only a vignette of the larger public consumption scene in West Malaysia and should not be taken as an indication that they are ethnically exclusive. Although the Malays avoid dining at Chinese *kopitiams*, this does not mean that they do not eat with friends from other ethnicities altogether. The Malay respondents claimed that they do eat with their non-Malay friends in public places, as long as the eatery serves halal food. This affirms Duruz and Khoo's (2015:183) point that "at an everyday level, Malaysians are less segregated and isolated from each other and much more cosmopolitan or accommodating of difference than the impression given by screaming media headlines about growing

racial and religious intolerance". While the state has enforced borders around ethnicity by using religion as a dividing force, the respondents appropriate ethnicity to bridge religious differences. Many of the respondents informed me that the Malaysian '*mamak*' stall would be the popular choice to dine whenever they are hanging out with friends from multi-ethnic backgrounds.

'*Mamak*' is a Malaysian colloquial that refers to Indian Muslims who have migrated to Peninsular Malaysia. '*Mamak*' stalls are food places owned by these Indian Muslims that have become ubiquitous features in the Malaysian urban landscape (Olmedo and Shamsul 2015). As a Chinese respondent Tom mentioned, "Whenever we (he and his Malay friends) can't decide where to eat, '*mamak*' will be the solution!" Another interviewee, Aniq, a Malay student, jokingly told me that he had no choice but to cater to his Indian-Muslim's friend's liking for curry by going to a *mamak* stall whenever he hangs out with her "since she is Indian". Similarly, Syazni, cited above, who has qualms about eating at a Chinese coffee shop, does not mind dining with his Chinese friends at a *mamak* stall.

Malaysian scholars who have written about this culture of eating at *mamak* stalls have argued that such stalls serve as a locus in promoting social cohesion in the country, as the *mamak* signifies Malaysian multi-ethnic landscape (Duruz and Khoo 2015; Olmedo and Shamsul 2015). Serving *halal* Malay, Indian and Chinese cuisines, and non-alcoholic drinks, the stalls have become social gathering spots for Malaysians regardless of ethnicity, class and age. It is owing to this reason that Olmedo and Shamsul (2015) characterise *mamak* stalls as 'third places', to borrow from the term first coined by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg. According to Oldenburg (1997: 22-23), "Third places are neutral grounds upon which people may gather, and act as levellers, which reduce men to an equality." Tom's point on how dining at *mamak* offers a solution to him and his Malay friends captures the essence of its neutrality, as *mamak* stalls do not cater exclusively to any specific ethnicity. By coming up with this alternative framework of reference, the respondents show how they manage to overcome inter-ethnic tensions. Therefore, far from being exclusionary, Malaysians of different ethnic backgrounds have shown that they are able to dine alongside one another. While the effects of Islamisation have increased the Malay students'

consciousness about *what* and *where* they eat, it has not affected their attitude or behaviour towards *who* they eat with.

The interweaving of ethnicity and religion is also evident in the respondents' narratives through the way they appropriate ethnic markers like food items to engage in discussions about religious differences. While food like pork have been discussed in alarming tones in public and state discourses, others, such as traditional food items that are identifiable with particular ethnic communities, have been appropriated in public campaigns to forge ethnic harmony. However, such essentialised markers have served little to foster meaningful cross-cultural interaction and deeper inter-faith understanding among the various ethnicities. Instead, the respondents have shown that an engagement with ethnicised themes in films can provide opportunities for cross-cultural and inter-faith dialogues that expand the boundaries of institutionalised and lived Islam. The former refers to a form of Islam that results from the state's restriction of open discussion of religious issues in the public sphere, whereas the latter disrupts the fixity of the state's Malay-Muslim ideologies by "[valuing a] person's everyday life experiences and circumstances, socio-cultural and geopolitical embeddedness, and inter-personal relationships" (Goh 2014:608). Although there have been attempts to blur the boundaries between institutionalised Islam and lived Islam in Malaysia, such efforts remain largely grounded in the realm of academia. Even so, many of these studies do not employ methods that take into account the Malaysian lived experience. On the contrary, my research shows that even though the focus group activities may only provide a liminal space for the discussion of social taboos, they represent a significant step towards pitching the viewpoints of the masses against those of the state.

One way in which the respondents expand the borders of institutionalised and lived Islam is through their appropriation of the concept of '*dakwah*'. *Dakwah* is a term used to describe the increasing support for missionary work and proselytization of Islam. At the core of this concept is the obligation for Muslims to propagate their faith (Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010). This concept has its origin in the Islamist movement that emerged in the 1970s initiated by young, educated and middle-class Muslims. As a movement, the *dakwah* became politically prominent during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In the 1980s, *dakwah* ideologies were incorporated into the

Malaysian government through the appointment of Anwar Ibrahim, who co-founded ABIM. Since then, there has been an increasing institutionalisation of Islamic laws and values in public life, including in the educational, legal and banking sectors. Unlike many studies that discuss the *dakwah* concept on the macro level, that is, one that is influenced by broader political attempts to institutionalise Islam, my findings point to how the Muslim respondents from the focus group discussions are able to embrace this concept to forge inter-cultural understanding among themselves and their friends at the micro level through their discussions of the films.

The interviews reveal that the participants from many of the multi-ethnic groups actively engaged with the concept of *dakwah* in the interviews, as the discussions provided them with the opportunity to use the films as a tool to promote inter-ethnic and inter-faith understanding among themselves. These groups are namely Groups B, E, G, J and L. In my interview with Group E, which comprised one Taoist, one Christian and five Muslim students, the Muslim participants informed me that they considered the FGD as an opportunity to do *dakwah* since they could exchange knowledge and perspectives with their Chinese counterparts. This is something that they will not engage in outside the context of the interview, as there are few opportunities for them to do so. I contend that the positive attitude of the Muslim students towards inter-cultural exchange signifies an important step towards extending the friendships between Muslims and non-Muslims from the individual level of inter-ethnic relations to the communal level. This is significant, as studies have shown that although individual members of the Malay community have friends from other ethnic groups, these friendships have not progressed to the group level, as distrust still lingers among these communities (Noraini and Leong 2013; Halipah 2016). As for the other groups, the concept of *dakwah* is also implicated in the FGD, though not in the sense of proselytising religion by religious elites. Some of the excerpts from the interviews are shown below, such as my interviews with Groups E and G. In the excerpt below from Group E, Hariz and Riduan are both Muslims.

> Hariz: I've always believed in respect for different beliefs. People will always say as Muslims, we have to '*berdakwah*' (proselytise) and so on. Tell non-Muslims why we cannot eat pork. But having a conversation like this (referring to the FGD) is also a kind of *dakwah*.

Riduan: Yeah. For me, *dakwah* is not only about encouraging people to learn about Islam, or asking people to convert to Islam. Islam is 'peace' and all. No. That's not how I interpret *dakwah*. Because when we have this kind of conversation, having new thoughts, new experience, that's also *dakwah*. Because we are exchanging thoughts, so we develop respect for others' beliefs.

In the following excerpt from my interview with Group G, Syazni and Hamid are both Muslims, Sue is a Taoist while the other four respondents are Buddhists. It highlights how the non-Muslim students made use of the FGD to clarify their doubts about Islamic rulings on pork consumption and dog touching. Likewise, the Muslim students were willing to share their knowledge with the Chinese students in a way that Hariz and Riduan were referring to.

Syazni: Yasmin Ahmad portrays the scene on pork to show Muslims that they shouldn't over-react, even though pork is dirty and gross. It's not a problem (to be in close proximity with people who are consuming pork).

Shi Ting: Yeah, yeah. Not a problem.

Kim: But why do Malays think that eating pork is dirty? I don't understand. In '*Gadoh*', it's also mentioned that pork is dirty. Why?

Sue: Hmmm… *ya lor* (sub-standard English expression to indicate agreement).

Syazni: I'm not sure about this 'cos we Malays been taught about this long ago.

Kim: But cows are also dirty, right?

Sue: Maybe it's just different belief. Like how in some countries, in

US and Europe, people don't show violence towards dogs. But in China, people eat dogs!

Hamid: Actually, there's an answer to that. Besides the fact that it's already stated in the Quran and so Muslims have to believe that, pigs contain parasitic organisms in their bodies that cannot be destroyed even after cooking. As Muslims, we believe that we have to consume food that is good and not harmful to our body. That's the concept in Islam. So Islam is actually a practical religion.

Chinese students: Oh! (Nodding head in agreement)

Sue: What about dogs? Why can't Muslims touch dogs?

Me: Actually, we can touch dogs.

Chinese students: Huh??

Me: We can touch dogs because it's not considered *haram* in Islam. But we have to cleanse ourselves with soil and running water after coming into contact with one. (I then explained to the interviewees the various Islamic positions and rulings with regard to touching dogs and keeping them as pets).

Chinese students: Ohhhh!!

The findings demonstrate that the respondents' deep interest in inter-cultural exchanges, as well as willingness to overcome their own cultural biases in a multi-ethnic context reiterate the divergence between the state's top-down management of multi-ethnicity and the undergraduates' bottom-up appropriation of it. The state's version of multi-ethnicity suggests a static approach that encourages each ethnic group to exist harmoniously alongside another but that at the same time enforces borders around ethnicity. Attempts to understand the cultures of others are only promoted under the condition that one's own culture remains uncompromised. On the

other hand, the respondents' understanding of multi-ethnicity is more dynamic, as it engages with the ethnicised boundaries established by the state, yet through their initiative to seek knowledge that transcends ethnic differences, blurs these essentialised boundaries. Their attitude echoes what Malaysian author K.S. Maniam terms as "new diaspora", which is conditioned by their ethnicities but do not let these ethnicities restrict their ability to find common ground or links with other ethnicities (Duruz and Khoo 2015).

The interview with Group G also enables the respondents to clarify their own misconceptions about ethnicity and religion. In the above excerpt, Syazni's comment that goes "I'm not sure about this 'cos we Malays been taught about this long ago" points to his uncertainty about the real reason why Muslims cannot consume pork. Instead of citing religious rationale, as what Hamid did, Syazni erroneously attributed it to cultural reasons instead. This excerpt is only a snapshot of the state of cross-cultural and inter-faith dialogue in Malaysia, which is currently underdeveloped. Part of this reason lies in the lack of competence among Malaysians themselves. It is only when they are equipped with a deeper knowledge of their religion will they be able to articulate their religious opinions more confidently and participate more effectively in cross-cultural dialogue. Through direct confrontation of ethnic and religious issues depicted in the films, the interviewees are able to deepen their understanding of their own religion as well as others in a way that would not have been possible without the cross-cultural opportunities that the group discussion has created.

4.3 Inter-Faith Relations

Out of the 27 films in the filmography, only Yasmin Ahmad's films contain themes on inter-faith relations. As such, this section will focus on the narratives of those who have watched '*Sepet*', '*Gubra*', '*Muallaf*' and '*Talentime*'. Yasmin's films are unique because they do not necessarily rely on overt markers of religiosity, such as religious symbols, to accentuate religious piety. Rather, notions of religiosity in her films are identified more closely with the spiritual aspects of the living being, and a sense of cosmopolitan consciousness that emphasise humanist values, such as love and forgiveness (Khoo 2009a; Richards and Zawawi 2012). This very philosophy of her

films makes them fitting for my inquiry on how Islam is positioned within the multi-religious and multi-ethnic context of day-to-day living in Malaysia. Yasmin's commitment to forge cosmopolitan consciousness is also evident in the representations of religions other than Islam, especially in '*Gubra*', '*Muallaf*' and 'Talentime'. '*Gubra*' is the second sequel of the 'Orked' trilogy and follows from the first instalment, '*Sepet*'. It tells the story of the grown-up Orked, who is married to a Malay man called Arif, but later seeks comfort in Alan, the brother of the deceased Jason when she discovers that Arif has cheated on her. Concurrently, the film explores the relationships among a muezzin and his wife, and their female neighbours, who work as sex workers. Interspersed throughout '*Gubra*' are scenes that depict the thematic issues of love, multi-religiosity and cross-cultural connectivity. On the other hand, '*Muallaf*' narrates the friendship between two young Muslim sisters, Rohana and Rohani, and a Catholic teacher, Brian, and their pursuit of seeking solace in religion. What makes this film fascinating is the deep interest of the characters in inter-faith relations. On the other hand, 'Talentime' depicts substantial scenes featuring Hindu customs and rituals, which is different from the typical mainstream local films that are dominated by Islamic images. In summary, the notion of what constitutes religiosity in Yasmin's films is multifarious and not limited to Islamic values or formalistic identifiers of religion alone. The next section will examine the respondents' interpretations of these diverse representations.

4.3.1 Undergraduates' Interpretations of Inter-Faith Representations in Yasmin Ahmad's Films

Many scholars have lauded Yasmin's films for challenging the hegemony of Islam in Malaysia by encoding ethnic and religious pluralism, as well as the on-going social struggles of ethnic minority groups, all of which have generally been overlooked by mainstream films produced in the country (Khoo 2009a; McKay 2012; Daniels 2013). These issues are not only problematised in her widely acclaimed first feature film '*Sepet*', but in her subsequent features as well. For instance, Daniels (2013:114) posits that the film '*Muallaf*' contests Malaysian Islam's supremacy by featuring a "horizontal rather than hierarchical relationship between Islam and other religions". Likewise, Khoo (2007, 2009) argues that the contribution of Yasmin's '*Sepet*' and

'*Gubra*' to the discourse on ethnicity lies in its cosmopolitan references that transcend ethnic and national loyalties.

However, unlike the scholars' understanding of the films, my interviewees' responses indicate that their interpretations is neither necessarily parallel with the filmic messages that the filmmakers intend to convey nor as oversimplified as the general reading of the films by most scholars. This means that the respondents do not always adopt a negotiated or oppositional reading position when interpreting the films as conceptualised by Stuart Hall, which are still articulated in relation to the hegemonic ideas contained in the films. Rather, they appropriate discourses from their everyday lived experiences that are not necessarily predicated on those ideas. Thus, instead of simply exploring whether the films are representative or not representative of reality, it is important to interrogate how the interviewees' interpretations of the films bear a meaningful relationship to their everyday lives.

My findings indicate that all of my respondents have watched at least one feature film directed by Yasmin Ahmad prior to the film screening session. As shown in Appendix B, 56% of them have watched '*Sepet*', 33% have watched '*Gubra*', 42% have watched '*Muallaf*' and 23% have watched 'Talentime'. Since my respondents were most familiar with Yasmin's films, which contain the most number of inter-religious scenes, most of my discussions on inter-religious relations with them revolve around these films. The next sub-sections reveal how respondents of different religious affiliations responded to the inter-religious themes featured in the films. Bearing in mind that the notion of what constitutes 'religiosity' is open to debate, I avoided making specific references to the scenes and dialogues that contain religious expressions in my interviews. Instead, I left the definitions of religious piety and inter-religious relations open to the respondents' interpretations. This strategy enabled me to uncover any taken-for-granted aspects of films that could be considered religious, and problematise existing scholarly definitions of films that capture the spirit of inter-religious relations.

4.3.1.1 Interpretations of Hindu Respondents

Based on the findings, it can be discerned that the everyday lived experience, as well as wider socio-political events in Malaysia, contribute significantly to how the respondents interpreted the films. The religious groups that often relate the filmic representations of Islam to the broader state discourse on Islamisation in Malaysia are the Hindus, Christians and Buddhists. However, it was the Hindu respondents who were the most perturbed by what they considered excessive portrayals of Islam in Yasmin Ahmad's films when asked about what they thought about the inter-faith representations in the films. The Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and interviewees of other religious affiliations neither felt the same way nor expressed any strong reaction towards these representations. So were those who did not subscribe to any religion.

The film that was most talked about among the Hindu interviewees who have watched other inter-ethnic films besides '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*' is '*Muallaf*', which to them contains substantive and diverse depictions of Islamic piety despite its inter-religious themes. '*Muallaf*' revolves around the lives of two pious Malay sisters, Rohani (Sharifah Amani) and Rohana (Sharifah Aleysha), who flee to Ipoh from Kuala Lumpur to escape their father's physical abuse. There, they meet a Chinese teacher, Brian (Brian Yap), who drives the younger Rohana home after she was caned by another teacher who was irritated by her incessant recitation of numbers in class. Brian and Brother Anthony, the Catholic principal, later discover that the girls are proficient in comparative religion and that the numbers are chapters and verses from various religious texts. Intrigued by their religious piety, Brian who is undergoing his own religious journey in trying to overcome his traumatic childhood experience of abuse by his staunch Catholic parents, borrows and studies the girls' Quran. Following several encounters with the girls, he becomes friends with them.

Among the 11 Hindu interviewees who have watched '*Muallaf*' before, 9 of them expressed discontentment that although elements of inter-faith relations are portrayed in the film, the dominant images featured in it are still Islamic ones. They attribute this to Yasmin's attempt to appeal to the Muslim majority in the country while simultaneously incorporating diversity. Such inclusivity resonates with what cultural critic David Roediger terms as "racial in-betweenness", which refers to the effort of blurring ethnic categories through the creation of an ethnic middle ground status, one

that serves to appeal to a minority audience while at the same time retains a viewership of the majority ethnic group that can identify with the middle ground position the characters occupy (Roediger 2005). Indeed, the film depicts many scenes where the girls are seen performing their prayer in prayer gowns (Figure 4.6). The religious text that is often featured in the film is the Quran. Some of the respondents also expressed displeasure when making reference to the scene where the Muslim heroine was seen reading the Quran to the hospitalised Chinese boy who has slipped into a coma (Figure 4.7). They condemned Yasmin for being insensitive since the Chinese boy is presumably a non-Muslim. Additionally, they found that Brian's interest in Islam, as exemplified by his enthusiasm to read the Quran (Figure 4.8), and his curiosity to know how the Muslim prayer is performed (Figure 4.9), problematic, since he is a believer of Catholicism.

Figure 4.6: Rohani and Rohana perfoming the evening prayer in their home

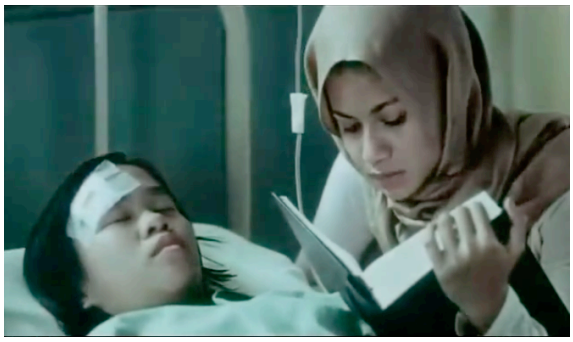

Figure 4.7: Rohani reading the Quran to a comatose patient at the hospital

Figure 4.8: Brian flipping through the pages of the Quran

Figure 4.9: Brian taking a peep at Rohani and Rohana who are performing their prayer at the mosque

The respondents' comments reflect sentiments that films like '*Muallaf*' resemble wider state attempts to preserve Islam's hegemony by distancing themselves from the religious practices of non-Muslims. These are strongly expressed by Hindu respondents Deepa and Priya whom I cited below, respectively. Their responses demonstrate that attempts to forge positive inter-faith relations in Malaysia are mostly one-sided in that while non-Muslims are taking initiatives to learn about other religions, Muslims are not doing likewise.

> In the film '*Muallaf*', it shows that the Chinese man (Brian) is interested in the two sisters' religion, which is Islam. But it

> doesn't show that the sisters have the same interest in his religion. This is what's happening in Malaysia. Other races are always keen to learn about the Muslim religion, but the Muslims never show interest in our religion.
>
> Indian temples are open to everyone. So are Chinese temples. Indians are allowed to go to Chinese temples and vice versa. But in Malaysia, Muslims will restrict non-Muslims from entering the mosques, even for educational purpose. Non-Muslims are not even allowed to step into the mosque compounds. If they do that, they will appear in the news even though they don't do anything wrong. So non-Muslims don't know what's actually going on, the pureness of prayers. The Muslims also won't visit the Hindu temple, even for educational purpose.

The Hindu respondents would also often make references to their places of worship when discussing the films even though these are not portrayed in the films. Besides Priya, Munish is another such respondent, who is cited in the following excerpt:

> I've watched '*Muallaf*', I've watched '*Sepet*'. In both films, you can see that Indians are under-represented. Other Malaysian films are also like that. You seldom see Indians acting. Why am I not surprised? In Malaysia, everything belongs to them (the Muslims). I don't understand why we are treated like that. We have this '1 Malaysia' here. But so far, we are not treated as '1 Malaysia'. Yes, I do understand that the majority are Malays, and most of the privileges go to them, but they (the government) need to think about other races as well. Make things equal to everyone. If you go to Facebook, you'll see that there's a lot of anti-Indian page there. Some Malays have even threatened to destroy the

> temples at Batu Caves.[5] But the government don't do anything about it.

Notwithstanding the abundant depictions of Islamic religiosity in '*Muallaf*', '*Muallaf*' does not offer any indication that it is trying to proselytise Islam, much less 'convert' viewers to Islam. Even though the film is entitled 'The Convert' and features Brian's interest in Islamic elements, nowhere in the film does it depict Brian converting to Islam. Although Brian is seen visiting an Islamic institution, reciting the Quran to the comatose patient, and expressing his interest to study Arabic with Rohani if she returns to Ipoh, viewers are never informed that he embraces Islam. Rather, it is about how the girls motivate him to become a true believer of God. The notion that God will reward true believers and not Muslims alone is featured throughout the film. For example, Rohani advises Brian to forgive his mother, visit her in Penang and take her to church on Sunday. Moreover, even though the Hindu respondents claimed that '*Muallaf*' contains substantive images of Islam, they failed to notice that it contains a fair share of representation of the Catholic faith as well, such as scenes of Brother Anthony in the chapel (Figures 4.10 and 4.11). In fact, Rohana's enrolment in a Catholic school can be read as an act of social transgression, as it not the norm for Muslims to be studying in a Catholic school out of fear of Catholic indoctrination. In addition, although the Quran is the only holy book featured in the film, Rohani and Rohana also express the same respect towards other religious and philosophical texts as well, such as the Bible and Tao Te Ching, memorising and reciting segments from them. The incorporation of other religions in the filmic narrative to achieve comprehensiveness in representation, like what the Hindu interviewee Munish desires for is impossible given the duration of the film. However, attempts to deconstruct the hegemonic status of Islam in mainstream cinema come across strongly throughout the film. Thus, the Hindu respondents' claim that *Muallaf* is largely about Islam is inaccurate.

[5] Batu Caves is a popular tourist attraction spot in Selangor. A site of Hindu temples and shrines, it draws thousands of tourists and worshippers especially during the annual Hindu festival of Thaipusam.

Figure 4.10: Immediately after witnessing Rohana being kidnapped by a group of men, Brother Anthony is seen running to the school chapel and praying to God for the girl's safety

Figure 4.11: One of the closing scenes in '*Muallaf*' depicts Brother Anthony welcoming several Catholic believers into the church, with church music echoing in the background.

Nonetheless, the constant reference made by the Hindu respondents to their lived environment and experience affirms that their filmic interpretations do represent their lived realities, in which they are marginalised as ethnic minorities. Huge concerns about their places of worship can be explained by the fact that the survival of these sites is at stake especially in recent years. Reports on the widespread demolition of Hindu temples and shrines by local authorities throughout the country are indeed rampant (Yeoh 2009; Loh 2010; Sinha 2014). In one incident that took place in

Kampung Java, Klang in 2007, a shrine was indiscriminately demolished on the eve of the Hindu festival of Deepavali (Loh 2010). Nagajaran (2009) has attributed these insensitivities to the increasing ethnic and religious chauvinism of state officials in recent years. Indeed, in another incident in 2009, 16 Indian-Hindus were arrested for organising a peaceful march at Dataran Merdeka to protest against the desecration of a cow's head by a group of Malay-Muslims, who were earlier protesting against the location of a Hindu temple in the vicinity of their residence in Petaling Jaya (Kua 2015). While the Hindus faced legal consequences for their action, the Malay-Muslims got away with their offence. More recently, 25 major Hindu shrines were removed in the city of Putrajaya to make way for the development of the administrative capital (Free Malaysia Today, 8 January 2015). The demolishment of these temples in plantation areas adversely affected the livelihoods of the Hindu plantation workers as they were forced to vacate the areas by the authorities. There are many other incidents involving the clash between non-Muslims and Muslims that are underreported in mainstream media but have appeared on a larger extent elsewhere in non-official accounts, such as social media.

The defensiveness of the Hindu students may be interpreted as a form of ethnic resistance to the perceived threat of Hinduism in Malaysia vis-à-vis the increasing institutionalisation of Islamisation in the urban environment. Celebrated as markers of Malaysian Hindu identity, Batu Caves and other significant shrines and temples bear huge significance to the local Indian community (Willford 2007). This is especially so since Hindu places of worship have become the repositories of Indian history, culture and identity in Malaysia for more than 150 years. Historically, as Indian families from South India settled in new jungle clearings, they had built temples on those sites based on the cultural and religious beliefs that no settlement is complete for a Hindu unless it has a temple, and that it is the responsibility of the Hindu community to build one if the settlement has no place of worship (Nagarajan 2009). In her research on Hindu deities in urban cities like Kuala Lumpur, Sinha (2014) has also shown how assertions of Hindu religious rights by the Hindu community in Malaysia are often intertwined with their ethnic and socio-cultural rights (Sinha 2014). Being the most marginalised ethnic community in Malaysia in terms of economic and political power, working-class Indians have turned to religious symbols like Hindu temples as a source of

comfort (Nagarajan 2009). The demolishment of Hindu places of worship have thus led to violent confrontations between Hindu devotees and the government, who are mostly made up of Malay elites.

Articulating such ethnic-based causes explains why the respondents feel that their religious identity is under threat. In his extensive study of Malaysian Indians, Willford (2007) argues that this view is problematic, as it suggests that inter-ethnic solidarity and the protection of religious identity are necessarily linked. To Willford, the maintenance of ethnic harmony necessarily requires the re-inscription of identity along ethnic lines, which would only reinforce ethnic boundaries and hierarchies. However, I contend that in a country that is already so ethnicised, an analysis of how ethnicity and religion are enmeshed with each other would better enrich our understanding of why ethnic minorities like the Indians feel oppressed and marginalised. As the findings have demonstrated, the causes are not solely religious but are intertwined with years of ethnic history and cultural traditions. Furthermore, if the average Malaysian is able to eliminate any bigoted views of others, then even the hardening of ethnic borders or a heightened sense of religious identity would not prevent them from forging positive inter-ethnic relations. Thus, the next question that should be raised is how do Malaysians of other religious or non-religious affiliations negotiate their relations with others within the government's existing hegemonic ethnic ideology? It is to this question that the next section will turn.

4.3.1.2 Interpretations of Muslim Respondents

Academic writings and mainstream reports have often linked increasing Islamic piety in the country with a growing sense of religious conservatism among Muslims, (Koh and Ho 2009; Hong 2014; Naidu 2015). Indeed, such attitudes can be found in hard-core Islamists, ranging from those who adopt a religious lens to every aspect of social life to those who embody a sense of religious chauvinism marked by bigoted views of other religions. At the extreme end of the spectrum is the imposition of Islamic rulings onto non-Muslims. A case in point would be the government enforcement of Islamic dress code onto non-Muslims who wish to enter any government building in

the country. At the root of these concerns is the belief that non-Muslims and 'liberal' Muslims are threatening the dominance of Islam in Malaysia (Hong 2014).

Such conservatism is also manifested in the realm of filmic reception. This is illustrated in Timothy Daniels' ethnographic study in Kuala Lumpur in 2011, in which he interviewed 48 young Malays of various socio-economic backgrounds and educational qualifications. His findings revealed that majority of his interviewees read Yasmin's films as transgressing dominant Islamic norms and ignoring Islam's hegemonic position in Malaysian society (Daniels 2013). Khoo (2009) also shows how some Malays who are against the inter-ethnic elements in '*Sepet*' and '*Gubra*' lambasted these films in a television forum (Khoo 2009a). As intense as these studies may seem, they do not necessarily capture the views of the broader Malaysian public.

Contrary to these writings, none of my Muslim interviewees, be it those whom I interviewed individually or in groups, expressed any criticisms or parochial views towards representations of non-Islamic religiosity in films like 'Talentime', '*Muallaf*' and '*Gubra*'. 'Talentime' depicts substantive scenes that portray the Hindu faith, such as scenes that feature how the Hindu funeral rites (Figure 4.12) and wedding ceremony (Figure 4.13) are conducted. On the other hand, '*Muallaf*' and '*Gubra*' contain diverse expressions of piety that belong to the Catholic, Taoist and Buddhist faiths. Besides portraying Catholics praying in the chapel (Figure 4.10), '*Muallaf*' also shows the two Muslim sisters reading religious and philosophical texts other than the Quran, such as the Bible and the Tao Te Ching (Figure 4.14). Likewise, '*Gubra*' contains a scene of an elderly Taoist couple praying at the altar in their home (Figure 4.15).

Fifure 4.12: A scene from ‘Talentime’ depicting Hindu funeral rites

Figure 4.13: A scene from ‘Talentime’ showing a Hindu wedding ceremony

Figure 4.14: A scene from ‘*Muallaf*’ that exemplifies the two sisters’ obsession with religious and philosophical texts. In this scene, the younger Rohana is seen reading the Quran while at the same time drawing links with similar verses from the Bible and Tao Te Ching.

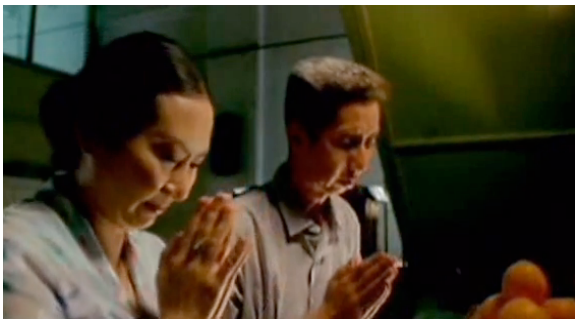

Figure 4.15: A scene from ‘*Gubra*’ depicting Alan’s parents praying at the altar in their home

32 of the 37 Muslim respondents who have watched the three films mentioned above found them interesting, as they claimed to have little knowledge of the practices and rituals of other religions since they seldom get to discuss such topics with their non-Muslim friends. As such, they lauded Yasmin for her boldness in showcasing inter-faith relations, which they acknowledged, is still taboo in Malaysia. For example, Natalia expressed it this way:

> '*Muallaf*' is about how two Muslim sisters befriend a Christian man, Brian. They are friends with each other even though they belong to different faiths. This is what multiculturalism in Malaysia should be like. Muslims should not avoid Christians, Hindus, et cetera. I've always believed in respect. Muslims should treat everyone with respect. Currently, in the news, there's too much hatred between Muslims and non-Muslims. It should not be that way.

Just like '*Muallaf*', those Muslim respondents who have watched 'Talentime' before showed a positive reaction towards the multi-ethnic and multi-faith elements in it. As expressed by Niza:

> 'Talentime' is very sweet!! Melur (the heroine) and Mahesh (the hero) come from different religion but they still 'couple with' (Malaysian lingo for 'date') each other. Even though Mahesh is Indian, and deaf, Melur still accepts him for who he is. Melur's mother is also very open. Even though she sees Mahesh sleeping at their home, she doesn't scold them for being intimate (Figure 4.16). As Muslims, we should not be freaking non-Muslims out with our close-mindedness.

Figure 4.16: In 'Talentime', Melur's mother comes home to see her daughter sleeping in the living room with her Hindu boyfriend Mahesh. Instead of scolding them for not observing the Islamic regulation on gender segregation, she empathises with them in the belief that they must be worn-out.

Another respondent, Meena, commented:

> 'Talentime' shows a lot of scenes about Hinduism. I would say 70% of the movie revolves around the Hindu lifestyle. Maybe because the hero, Mahesh, is a Hindu. It's good to show how other religions live their lives. Because sometimes we Malaysians lack the exposure about other people's religion. The only knowledge me and my friends get about other religion is from our course '*Hubungan Etnik*' ('Ethnic Relations' in English, which is a compulsory course for undergraduates at Malaysia's public and private universities).

Another Muslim respondent, Faruq, echoes Meena's thought:

> If you notice, Yasmin's films are always about multiculturalism. You'll find Chinese, Malay, Indian all in the same film. In 'Talentime', the heroine is not so Malay. I think she's mixed. Mixed Malay and *Mat Salleh* (Caucasian). By portraying different cultures and religions, we can learn about other people's cultures and religions.

The Muslim interviewees' tolerant and liberal attitude towards the representations of other religions shows that religious conservatism may not necessarily be an outcome of Islamisation. In fact, comments made by interviewees like Natalia and Niza suggest that it is the Muslim majority who should take the initiative to forge positive inter-faith relations with the non-Muslim minorities. Natalia regards the two Muslim sisters in '*Muallaf*' as role models for establishing good ties with Malaysians of other religious beliefs. Through Natalia and Niza's statements like "Muslims should not avoid Christians, Hindus, et cetera", "Muslims should treat everyone with respect" and "As Muslims, we should not be freaking non-Muslims out with our close-mindedness" also affirm the respondents' beliefs that Malays as the majority ethnic group hold great responsibility to bridge inter-religious differences. Additionally, Natalia's hope that "This is what multiculturalism in Malaysia should be like" and that there should not be "hatred between Muslims and non-Muslims" as reported in the news suggest that her desire to see Muslims and non-Muslims forming positive ties with one another is not limited to cinematic representations. Instead of merely expressing their views of the films and leaving them at the moment of consumption, the respondents interpret the films in a way that offers possibilities for real and practical changes in society.

The findings corroborate past research on the perceptions of Malaysian Muslim undergraduates from other universities towards inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. Generally, findings from other studies conducted on Muslim students from such universities as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in Bangi, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) in Penang demonstrate that the Muslim youth have positive impressions of the state of inter-ethnic relations in the country (Holst 2012; Halipah 2016; Nazri Muslim et. al. 2016; Nazri Muslim et. al. 2017). Some of these studies also show that the youth maintain positive relations with members of other ethnic groups. In fact, Holst's (2012) quantitative survey on USM students point out that Muslim students, particularly Malays, regardless of their state of origin, have more interaction with Chinese students both in school and in their residential environment than the latter. Additionally, the percentage of Malay students who are more receptive to the idea of marrying someone of a different ethnicised

group is higher than that of Chinese (59 percent compared to 32 percent) (Holst 2012).

In a nutshell, my findings prove that the Muslims' attitudes in recognising the importance of respecting other religions, and their desire to see Muslims acting as role models in forging good inter-ethnic ties, is a positive indication that Islamisation can be appropriated to serve this purpose. Nowhere in the course of the interviews did the respondents articulate concerns about how religion might be a barrier in promoting ethnic harmony. I postulate that this desire is partly attributed to the broader transformations in civil society and the increasing visibility of diverse socio-cultural groups in Malaysia. As Muniandy (2012) posits, Malaysian society is experiencing a shift from a society that is traditionally divided along ethno-religious lines to one that is characterised by more critical cosmopolitan struggles, to borrow from Beck's (2006) notion of 'critical cosmopolitanism', which witness increasing public debates and contestations over emergent socio-cultural identities. The heightened awareness within public consciousness of the visible presence of minority communities in society, as well as the greater public participation in debates that expand the role and function of Islam transform them into struggles within civic spheres (Muniandy 2012).

The findings also challenge mainstream media reports that often highlight ethnic diversity in alarmist tones and with constant reference to the tumultuous past, specifically, to the May 13th ethnic riot in 1969. Ethnic differences are regarded as potential fault lines rather than opportunities to create a culture that embraces and understands those differences. Reminders of ethnic riots as a threat to ethnic and religious harmony are appropriated as standard narratives with a disregard for how disconnected these narratives are from the contemporary lived realities of the public. It is this very attempt to preserve social harmony by framing ethnicity and religion as sensitive issues for open public discourse that will foster an environment where ethnic prejudices get further entrenched over time, forming the basis for more discrimination and inter-communal strife in the future.

Furhermore, the findings contest studies that suggest that ethnic and religious identities are necessarily distinct. Reports on how Malaysians rank various markers of identity they would like to identify themselves with are a case in point. Many of these reports have highlighted how Malaysian Malays often prioritise their Muslim identity over national and ethnic identity, as they regard Islam as the moral path to follow in the midst of modernisation (Peletz 2002; Khoo 2006; Martinez 2006). For instance, in a recent poll conducted by independent pollster Merdeka Centre, 60 per cent of Malays see themselves as being Muslims first compared to 27 per cent who had identified themselves as Malaysians and 6 per cent as Malays (Teo 2015).

I argue that such studies are too simplistic and reductionist, as they do not problematise the true essence of being a Muslim, Malay or a Malaysian. Against the backdrop of rising Islamisation in the country, the issue that should be of utmost concern is not one of what type of identifier that Malaysians value most. Rather, it is how individual Malays perceive Muslimness that matter. If being a Muslim is marked by an understanding of Islam that rests upon the notion of Malay-Muslim supremacy, then that may threaten ethnic and religious harmony in the country. However, if the understanding of Islam is one that is open and tolerant of other ethnicities and religions, then a rising trend of Islamisation can be a source of forging better inter-ethnic relations among Malaysians. Hence, being a Muslim and being a Malay or Malaysian need not be opposing concepts, and the low percentage of Malays identifying themselves as Malaysians as highlighted in the reports does not necessarily mean that the Malays are not patriotic. Although there are political parties such as *Parti Amanah Negara* or National Trust Party that reject the rhetoric of Malay-Muslim supremacy and instead push for a more inclusive Islam in politics, which promotes peace and equality for all Malaysians regardless of ethnicity, they have yet to come up with a substantial framework that is based on a coherent philosophical foundation (Maszlee 2017).

4.3.1.3 Interpretations of Respondents of Other Faiths

Much like how the Hindu respondents linked the inter-religious representations in films to their lived experience, the Christian respondents too articulated concerns in

relation to the prevailing socio-political climate of the time. At the time of conducting fieldwork, several inter-religious issues in the lived environment have escalated religious tensions in the country. These include the removal of the cross symbol from the façade of a church in Taman Medan, and the ban on the use of the Arabic word 'Allah' in Christian bibles by Malaysia's highest court. In April 2015, a group of 50 Muslims had staged a protest against a newly built church in Taman Medan for displaying a huge cross symbol outside the church's building (Malay Mail Online 20 April 2015; Naidu 2015). Forcing the church to remove the symbol, the protesters claimed that putting up the cross in the predominantly Malay area is a challenge to Islam and could pose a "threat" of religious conversion to young Muslims. Although the church took down the cross later, the incident had raised inter-religious strife in the country especially in light of a slew of similar incidents that had happened previously. Prior to the cross incident, Malaysia's highest court had dismissed Christians' request to use the word 'Allah' in the Malay-language edition of the local churches' *Herald* newspaper (The Guardian, 23 June 2014). While the Christians insisted that they had the constitutional right to refer to God as "Allah", conservative Muslim rights activists felt that Christians are overstepping religious boundaries, as the term should only be used by Muslims to refer to their God. As such, referring to the Christian God as "Allah" in Christian religious texts is an insult to those Muslims, who believed that such texts might confuse Muslims and lead them astray from Islam. This dispute is not a new one in the country. In late 2013, Islamic authorities confiscated hundreds of bibles containing the word "Allah" from a Christian organisation in Selangor (Brown 2014).

Majority of the Christian respondents engaged with these issues in their interpretations of '*Muallaf*', particularly to the scenes taken in a church. In my interview with Group A, which is made up of four Muslims, one Hindu and one Christian student, the Christian student called John views his minority status as an opportunity to exchange views on inter-ethnic relations with his Muslim counterparts. Upon learning about his fellow Muslim interviewees' tolerance towards the inter-religious scenes in '*Muallaf*', John expressed his pleasure, as quoted below:

> I am happy to know that my Muslim friends are open to watching these scenes. Not all Muslims would feel comfortable watching films that show scenes in the church, what more to see Rohani enrolling her sister in a Catholic school. Currently, in Malaysia, there is too much sensitivity shown by Muslims towards this kind of thing, as you can tell from the 'cross' issue lately. I don't understand why Muslims must make a big hoo-ha out of it. Malaysia is a multi-religious country. Malays, Chinese and Indians should be co-existing peacefully instead of dividing the nation like what they are doing now.

Other non-Muslim students, such as a Taoist student called Shan from Group M, an all-Chinese group, express similar views, which are representative of the views of other Taoists and Buddhists whom I interviewed. As Shan remarks:

> I grow up among friends of all religious backgrounds. When I read about all these issues in the newspaper like the 'cross' issue, the 'Allah' issue, I got very upset. The film '*Nasi Lemak* 2.0' also caused controversy because of these kinds of issues. There is a part where a Chinese was saying in Cantonese to another Chinese, "*Assalamualikum"* ('May peace be upon you' in Arabic). If you don't answer my greetings, it is sinful". That scene caused a bit of a controversy among Muslims who found it insulting that a non-Muslim was saying that. For me, I find nothing wrong with that. As a matter of fact, I find it cool that a Chinese is able to speak Muslim language… '*Gubra*' also shows a lot of scenes of different religions praying. That's what Malaysia is about. Malays, Chinese, Indians should all come together and celebrate religious differences instead of quarrelling like in the newspaper.

Based on the responses, the respondents perceived religion less as a political weapon to heighten inter-ethnic or inter-religious tensions as appropriated by the authorities than as a tool to unify the nation. The remarks of John and Shan in the above excerpts illustrate the students' understanding that inter-religious harmony in Malaysia relies on the peaceful co-existence of the major ethnic groups. Invoking ethnicities as

crucial components of inter-religious harmony also highlights the conflation of ethnic and religious identities in the cultural imagination of the respondents, as well as how they view these two elements as interdependent in contributing to the nation's peace. Likewise, by expressing fascination towards the Chinese character who is able to utter the Islamic way of greeting in '*Nasi Lemak* 2.0', and the juxtaposition of prayer scenes in '*Gubra*', Shan represents those interlocutors who feel that expressions of religious piety can be an instrument of multi-ethnic harmony. Appropriating such religious signifiers go beyond the traditional markers of ethnic food, costumes and festivals employed by the state in fostering multi-ethnic harmony. Furthermore, rationalising the use of Islamic word by non-Muslims as acceptable and even framing it as stylish affirm the right of religious minorities to exercise their religious freedom, thereby challenging the intolerant policy of the state, which dictates that Muslim words are only reserved for use by Muslims.

Shan's comments are also intriguing, as they are expressed in the company of her friends who are all Chinese. Unlike John who may feel pressured to express views that reflect inter-religious conviviality in the presence of his Muslim friends, Shan's comments can be taken as a genuine expression of openness towards inter-religious harmony. My analyses of the perspectives of those interlocutors from Groups H and I, which comprise all-non-Malay-Bumiputera students, and Chinese and Sino Kadazan, respectively, also reflect similar attitudes. The findings go to show that studies that have only emphasised the religious marker miss the important role of ethnicity in contributing to understandings of what religious harmony means to young people in Malaysia. On the other hand, studies that place too much emphasis on ethnicity overlook the ways in which its intersection with religion is able to pave the way for inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony in Malaysia from the perspectives of its youth.

4.4 Inter-Ethnic Romance

4.4.1 Views on Inter-Ethnic Relationship

This section interrogates the respondents' attitudes towards inter-ethnic romance as shown in the film '*Sepet*'. Since other films like 'Talentime', 'The Journey', '*Estet*', '29 *Februari*', '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*' also feature this theme in their narratives, I invited a discussion of these films as well whenever relevant so as to examine how their reception would compare with those of '*Sepet*'. As for other inter-ethnic romantic films like '*Sembilu* 2005' and '*Embun*', even though at least one-third of the respondents have watched them before, almost all of them either could not access the films online given the dated nature of the films, or could not finish watching the entire films prior to meeting me, as they were too long. Both films were screened more than a decade ago and lasted for at least two hours, interfering with their school commitments. As such, they were not able to offer any insights on these films. Likewise, none of them has watched '*Bahaya Cinta'* and '*Gerimis*' whereas only a negligible percentage of 4% and 5% of respondents have watched 'Spinning *Gasing*' and '*Paloh*', respectively.

My content analysis of the mainstream Malay movies '*Sembilu* 2005' and *'29 Februari'* demonstrate that unlike Yasmin's films that normalise the ethnic and religious differences of the couples involved, these mainstream films portray a plethora of complications arising from inter-ethnic relationships. '*Sembilu* 2005' tells the story of a teenage Malay girl, Salina (Hetty Sarlene) who falls in love with her schoolmate of Malay and British parentage, Vince (Vincent Chong). Both of their families disapprove of their relationship on the grounds of ethnic and religious differences. Likewise, in '29 *Februari*', a Malay man, Budi (Remy Ishak) faces strong rejection from the family of his Chinese girlfriend, Lily (Jojo Goh) when he asks for her hand in marriage due to the same reason. Both of these films do not conclude with a happy ending, suggesting the impossibility of such a relationship. Vince leaves Salina behind when he pursues his study abroad, while Lily dies shortly after reuniting with Budi. Although '*Sepet*' also has a tragic ending because Jason dies in a road accident, the parents of Orked and Jason are not against their relationship.

The normalisation of ethnic and religious differences largely explains why '*Sepet*' has raised controversies among conservative Malaysians, who found it problematic that the requirement for Jason to embrace Orked's faith was never broached throughout

the course of their relationship (Farah 2008). According to Islamic ruling, non-Muslims are required to embrace Islam when they want to marry a Muslim before the marriage can be considered legal. In Malaysia, both Islamic and civil laws have prohibited Muslim-non-Muslim marriages (Maznah *et. al.* 2009). For non-Muslims who would like to marry a Muslim, it is a legal requirement for him or her to convert to Islam (Jones *et al*. 2009). As such, inter-ethnic romance is another subject that is considered sensitive by the Malaysian public. The high profile case of Lina Joy in 2007, who renounced Islam to embrace Christianity out of marriage, attests to how individual personal issues can form the basis of heated public debates when the issue of religious conversion is concerned (Maznah *et. al.* 2009).

The complications that may arise out of inter-religious marriage may account for the low rate of inter-ethnic marriages in Malaysia. Nagaraj's study in 2009 has shown that although there is a notable increase of inter-ethnic marriages from 0.5 per cent in 1974 to 4.6 per cent in 2000, it remains a practice that is more prevalent in East Malaysia than in the Peninsular (Giok and Nidzam 2013). Other studies on inter-ethnic marriages have also proven that such marriage usually occurs within people from the same religious groups only, for instance, between Malays and Indian Muslims, and between Chinese and Indians who are both Christians (Chee *et. al.* 2009).

In my interviews, I asked the respondents about their views of the romantic relationship between the characters in '*Sepet*' and invited them to share any personal experience with inter-ethnic relationship. I also enquired whether or not they would envisage themselves being in one, and what are the reasons given in support of their positions. Overall, majority of the participants, regardless of religious affiliations, expressed interest in the theme of love without boundaries in the film, as highlighted in Table 4.1 below. None of them disliked the theme. Majority of them indicated that they liked it, liked it very much or were neutral about it, which means they neither had anything against it nor expressed any liking towards it. Specifically, as many as 87 out of 96 (90.6%) of them across all religious and non-religious groups either liked it or liked it very much.

Table 4.1: Attitudes Towards Inter-Ethnic Romance in '*Sepet*'

Attitude towards inter-ethnic romance/ Religion of respondent	Muslims	Hindus	Buddhists	Christians	Other Religions	No religion	Total Number
Like it very much	9	2	6	5	0	1	23
Like	31	10	8	8	5	2	64
Neutral	3	2	4	0	0	0	9
Dislike	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dislike it very much	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**43**	**14**	**18**	**13**	**5**	**3**	**96**

When asked about her views on '*Sepet*', a Christian student, Trisha opined:

> Race is not important in the relationship between Orked and Jason because they base their love on understanding and each other's character, on what complements them rather than race and religion or social expectations. They don't see each other as different but compatible.

Those respondents, who have watched other inter-ethnic films also indicated expression of interest in this theme. An Indian-Muslim participant, Sheela shared her view on the film 'Talentime' with me:

> I really like Yasmin Ahmad's 'Talentime' because it is a good expression of true love between two people regardless of race. Race is not an important aspect of the relationship between Melur (female protagonist) and Mahesh (male protagonist) because if you see your partner in terms of their skin colour, that's not love. If you like the person, you just confess to him or her even if he or she is from a different race.

Faruq, a Muslim student, enjoyed watching '*Estet*' for the same reason. *Estet* tells the story of a Malay estate plantation worker by the name of Farid (Farid Kamil), who falls in love with Geetha (Jasmine Michael), an Indian girl who lives in the same estate called '*Cinta Manis*'. Geetha's father is embroiled in a huge economic debt with the owner of the estate, Pooniah, who proposes to organise a soccer competition between The Estate of Cinta Manis and another estate called Red Cobra. If *Estet* Cinta Manis wins the competition, all of the debt will be settled. However, if they lose, Geetha will be married off to Pooniah. According to Faruq:

> In '*Estet*', a Malay guy couple with (dates) an Indian girl. I like how the filmmaker tries to promote multiculturalism through this film. He is trying to show that Malay and Indian can also get together.

Other students who have watched 'The Journey' expressed similar attraction to the film. 'The Journey' narrates the relationship between a conservative Chinese man Chuan (Frankie Lee) and his daughter, Bee (Joanne Yew). One day, Bee returns home from England with her fiancé, Benji (Ben Pfeiffer), an Englishman. Chuan refuses to offer his blessing. Upon discovering that Bee is pregnant with Benji's child, Chuan expects them to quickly tie the knot despite his reluctance due to the cultural differences and language barrier between him and Benji. However, he would like the wedding ceremony to be done in the traditional way. Despite their aloofness towards each other, Chuan and Benji embark on a nation-wide journey to personally deliver wedding invitations to the former's childhood friends. During the journey, they learn important lessons about accepting each other's differences. A Muslim respondent, Aisha, who has watched this film before, expressed her interest in the film as follows:

> Malay 'couple with' (dating) Chinese may be a normal thing already in Malaysia. But to see a Malaysian 'couple with' (dating) a *mat salleh* (Caucasian) is a big thing because there are even more cultural differences to overcome. It would be nice if Malaysian movies produce more films like this, like experimenting with the relationships between Malaysians with Koreans, or Malaysians with Turks.

However, the respondents' inclination towards the inter-ethnic romance in the films does not necessarily translate into them wanting to take up the characters' position and accepting such relationships in their private lives. Unlike the themes on food consumption and religious piety where their attitudes towards the filmic representations are closely aligned with their day-to-day lived experience, the respondents' approval of inter-ethnic romance on the screen diverges from what they would actually do in their real lives. Table 4.2 below summarises their attitude towards inter-religious marriage based on their religious affiliations. The question that I posed to them was whether or not they would be willing to embrace another religion out of marriage. I have categorised the responses according to whether or not they are willing to convert, not willing to convert or adopt a neutral stance towards conversion, which means they are not entirely against conversion and will remain open to it.

Table 4.2: Attitudes towards Religious Conversion for Marriage

Attitude towards inter-religious marriage/ Religion of respondent	Muslims	Hindus	Buddhists	Christians	Other Religions	No religion	Total Number
Willing to convert to Islam out of marriage	Not applicable	1	4	3	1	0	9

Not willing to convert to Islam out of marriage	Not applicable	11	9	7	2	2	31
Neutral	Not applicable	2	5	3	2	1	13
Total	**43**	**14**	**18**	**13**	**5**	**3**	**96**
Willing to convert to a religion other than Islam out of marriage	0	2	8	5	1	0	18
Not willing to convert to a religion other than Islam out of marriage	43	11	7	6	2	2	69
Neutral	0	1	3	2	2	1	9
Total	**43**	**14**	**18**	**13**	**5**	**3**	**96**

The findings reveal that the Muslim and Hindu respondents are the staunchest about their religions. The fear of Muslim respondents towards apostasy, together with the hardening of attitudes within Islam in Malaysia towards apostasy (Jones *et al*. 2009), justify why 100% of them are not willing to convert to another religion out of marriage. The prospects of inter-religious marriages are also low among the Hindus, who were almost unanimous in expressing disagreement towards marrying someone from a different religion, let alone converting to another religion for the sake of marriage. As Table 4.2 shows, as many as 11 out of 14 or 78.6% of the Hindus are reluctant to embrace Islam for marriage, which is the highest figure among non-Muslims who are against conversion to Islam. Two others do not have any opinion about this whereas only one of them is willing to convert. Even so, she maintained

that she would not abandon her Hindu beliefs and practices completely if she were required to convert. Raju, a Hindu, affirmed his stance against conversion below:

> Actually I have one philosophy- born as a Hindu, die as a Hindu. It's just to protect my religion. If everyone wants to convert, then what will happen to my culture, what will happen to my religion?

The data also demonstrates that the non-Muslim participants are more open to convert to other religions besides Islam for the sake of marriage. This is especially salient among the Buddhists and Christians. Compared to only 4 out of 18 Buddhists who do not mind embracing Islam, as many as 8 of them are in favour of converting to a religion other than Islam. Likewise, in contrast to only 3 Christians who are inclined to converting to Islam, 5 of them do not mind converting to a non-Islamic religion for marriage. Those non-Muslim respondents who expressed strong aversion towards conversion to Islam are those whose inter-ethnic relationships with Muslims had failed in the past due to parental influence. I cite three of my respondents who have been in a relationship with Muslims below. The past relationships formed during high school were short-lived, lasting from a month to a year. These respondents agreed with the complications that arise from the relationships between the Chinese heroine and Malay hero in the films '29 *Februari*' and '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*' in justifying their opposition to marrying Muslims. A Buddhist student, Ong, exemplifies this:

> The reaction of the Chinese girl's (Lily's) family to her relationship with the Malay boy (Budi) is expected and reasonable… It's hard to marry Muslims. Other religions still ok. Because my Mum said Malay men can get married to four wives. If I marry Malay, I might get neglected if he marries another woman. Islam also got many rules. Like cannot have premarital sex, cannot scold vulgarities.

Another student, Jessica, a Christian, remarked:

> When I watched '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa'*, I thought it's normal for Angela's parents to react that way. It will be very difficult for her to

> convert to a Muslim if her relationship with Rashid works out. If I were Angela, I won't marry Muslims. It's problematic. My mum told me that Muslim men don't treat women well. They regard women as of lower status than them.

The Hindu respondents were no exception to expressing comments that reflect parental influence. One such example is Suria, who is quoted below:

> Yes I am open to marrying someone of a different religion but not Muslims. That will never happen. No way! Since birth, we've been told by our parents not to date a Muslim. If he is a non-Muslim from another country, say, Britain, they are ok with it but not Muslim. We will respect their religion but they will never respect ours in return. Examples of things Muslim men cannot compromise are like prayers, going to temple, stuff like that.

While majority of the non-Muslims are against conversion to Islam, the extent to which their attitude is informed by the process of Islamisation in the country requires further interrogation. On the surface, their response seems to highlight a paradox- on the one hand, indications of willingness to convert to Islam only if they live outside of Malaysia hint towards the huge extent to which they have been affected by the macro processes of Islamisation in their country. On the other hand, this exception to accepting Islam in their lives means that at a more personal level, they are neither against Islam nor Muslims per se. Their aversion towards inter-religious marriage is not necessarily brought about by an inherent sense of prejudice against Islam or Muslims but may be shaped by local government institutions that embody Islamic supremacy at the expense of other religions.

Yet, nuances emerged to challenge the above assumptions. A noteworthy finding is that almost half or as many as 27 out of 53 non-Muslim respondents are unaware that the requirement for non-Muslims to embrace the Islamic faith should they marry a Muslim is not solely a legal national requirement that is imposed by local authorities, but a religious one. The lack of participants' awareness of this Islamic ruling is accentuated when I discovered that their stance on conversion to Islam for marriage

varies with geographical context. The response of a Buddhist student, Xiuhua, exemplifies this:

> I don't see myself converting to another religion for marriage but I don't mind converting to Islam if I live or migrate to another country.

The erroneous assumption that one needs to convert to Islam only if he or she lives in Malaysia is also demonstrated through my interview with the Hindu students. One of them is Pooja, who is cited below:

> If I convert to Islam, maybe that will happen if I don't live in Malaysia. Like the case of my relatives. They are in an inter-racial marriage- my uncle who is a Hindu got married to my aunt who is a Muslim. But they don't live in Malaysia. They live in Singapore. There, they can maintain separate religion. If I live elsewhere, I don't even need to convert to Islam if I marry a Muslim.

At first glance, it may seem like the non-Muslim respondents' willingness to embrace Islam only beyond the national boundary marks a departure from the '*masuk Melayu*' or 'become Malay' discourse that is often broached whenever a non-Muslim converts to Islam in Malaysia. This discourse is especially applicable to Chinese Muslims who are often excluded from the Muslim fraternity due to the history of divisiveness between these two ethnicities, as well as Muslim suspicion that the motive behind Chinese conversion to Islam is to benefit from the Bumiputera incentives. As such, by virtue of their conversion, Chinese Muslims in Malaysia are often confronted with the identity dilemma of how much Chineseness should they retain, and how much Malayness should they adopt. Rosey Ma, a Malaysian Chinese Muslim convert, argues that in the past and present context of multicultural living in Malay-dominated Malaysia, it is not enough for a convert to Islam to accept and learn the new religion. For him or her to gain full acceptance into the Malay Muslim fraternity, he or she has to learn and internalise the Malay lifestyle as well (Ma 2011).

However, a close inquiry of the respondents' attitudes towards inter-ethnic romance shows that their willingness to embrace Islam in certain circumstances is not

characterised by the way it is intertwined in Malaysia. Neither is it motivated by the desire to '*masuk Melayu*' nor the pressure to leave behind non-Malay lifestyle. In fact, the respondents do not even notice the conflation of being Muslim with being Malay in Malaysia. Furthermore, many of them lack a basic understanding of the differences between the terms 'ethnicity' and 'religion' as it pertains to the Malaysian context. I came to this realisation when I explored my interlocutors' awareness of the issue (or non-issue) of religious differences from a mixed ethnic relationship, in which I adopted a technique of interviewing where I first asked them about their attitude towards inter-ethnic marriage without mentioning anything about religion to find out if religion would be invoked in their initial responses. My findings show that many of the participants expressed immediate receptiveness of dating and marrying someone of a different *ethnicity*, particularly the 'Malays', 'Chinese' and 'Indians' in Malaysia. I postulated that this immediacy is attributed to their lack of awareness of the close intertwinement between 'ethnicity' and 'religion' in the country, which made them overlook the complications that may arise out of inter-*religious* marriages. This speculation was validated when the respondents, regardless of ethnic and religious backgrounds, were unable to differentiate between these two terms when asked to name the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. The groups they commonly listed were as follows: Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans, Kadazans, Sikhs and Christians. While the former five are constitutive of the ethnic groups in the country, the latter two fall within the category of religious affiliations instead. Thus, when they were probed on whether or not they are receptive of marrying someone of a different *religion*, many hesitated due to the heightened consciousness of the issues that they may encounter in an inter-religious marriage.

To sum up this section, I argue that it is not enough to deduce that the respondents' attitudes against inter-religious marriages are solely attributed to religious differences. By considering how notions of ethnicity inform their attitudes towards such marriages, we are able to uncover the real reason why inter-faith marriages are so taboo in Malaysia- that Malaysians' lack of understanding of their ethnic and religious identities is the cause of this. Hence, in this regard, the issue is not so much of how wider macro processes of Islamisation have informed their attitudes towards such marriages, but of how the interlocutors make sense of their ethnic identities at the micro level.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has elucidated how intersectionality can be conceptualised in a way that addresses both the role of ethnicity and religion without emphasising the importance of one over the other. Studies that emphasise the religious marker have often overlooked the role of ethnicity in providing alternative understandings of hegemonic constructs of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. On the other hand, works that emphasise ethnicity usually ignore the ways in which its intersection with religion can better inform how different ethnic communities negotiate the structural impacts of Islamisation on their lived experience.

In this chapter, I have suggested an approach that departs from placing primacy on one category over another and asked how, if at all, are ethnic and religious identities intertwined with each other in the respondents' narratives. In so doing, I discovered that these two categories are indeed simulataneously produced. Among the Hindu respondents, negotiations of their identities involve imbuing their religious traditions with ethnic meaning. By articulating ethnic-based causes towards religious issues, they enhance the value of ethnicity as a political power resource. As for the other non-Muslim respondents, by appropriating 'taboo' religious markers to bridge ethnic and religious differences, they have provided alternative understandings of religion as a divisive force that only serves to sharpen ethnic boundaries. Instead of viewing ethnic and religious identities as mutually exclusive of one another, they should be viewed as complementary. Likewise, Muslim respondents have also shown the inseparability of ethnicity and religion by highlighting that these two categories need not be two opposing concepts. Ethnicity and religion signify each other in their narratives to prove that both are central to the maintenance of inter-ethnic harmony in Malaysia. The value of considering these two categories as intertwined is also reflected in discussions on inter-ethnic romance. Explaining the respondents' aversion towards inter-ethnic marriages based on religious differences alone miss the role of ethnicity in informing their attitudes towards cross-cultural marriages. In light of the above, this study has shed some nuanced perspectives on the contribution of intersectionality to understandings of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia.

CHAPTER 5

Young People's Interpretations of Social Inequalities and Inter-Ethnic Themes in Malaysian Films

5.1 Introduction

> "… there will always be individual private readings [but what is important is] to investigate the extent to which these individual

> readings are patterned into cultural structures and clusters. What is needed [is] an approach which links differential interpretations back to socio-economic structure of society, showing how members of different groups and classes, sharing different "cultural codes', will interpret a given message differently, not just at the personal, idiosyncratic level, but in a way "systematically related" to their socio-economic position."
>
> (Morley 1980:14-15)

In his 1980 study titled '*The "Nationwide" Audience: Structure and Decoding*', sociologist David Morley argues that audience's class background is a significant social determinant of how they interpret media texts (Morley 1980). The study was part of a research conducted by scholars from the British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) who theorised how audience could engage with television content ideologically. It documented audience responses to 'Nationwide', a weekly and frequently watched news and public affairs program that was broadcast throughout Britain by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). As part of the research, Morley and his team interviewed a total of 29 groups of two to 13 people from various social, economic and educational backgrounds following the screening of two specific episodes of "Nationwide". Morley's work was seminal in its attempt to put Stuart Hall's decoding theories into practice with real audiences. It was the first study that examined audience interpretations of television empirically and systematically (Sullivan 2013). It was also a turning point in audience reception studies, as it adopted Hall's notion that audiences are capable of producing their own meanings from media texts beyond the hegemonic structures of those texts. These interpretations are inevitably shaped by the audience's social position.

In a similar vein, this chapter aims to examine the ways and extent to which the social class position of the Malaysian undergraduates may inform their interpretations of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysian films. As an extension of Morley's research, it attempts to make two important contributions to the discussion. First, it seeks to advance existing theories within audience reception studies by considering how class

position is intertwined with other social identities. Specifically, it will shed light on how the entwinement of ethnicity and class as social categories demonstrates the significance of intersectionality as an analytic tool in enriching our understanding that social inequality is shaped not just by a single axis of social division but various axes that influence one another. Second, by employing Savage's (2000) concept of 'cultural class analysis', this chapter aims to shift attention from the mere structural definitions of class to a focus on how broader cultural processes are embedded within specific social practices and discursive strategies in ways that would enable class identities to be constructed in a meaningful manner. In so doing, it seeks to problematise the tendency of Malaysians and even some scholars to essentialise the Bumiputera status and treat it as a normative identity, be it in everyday life or on-screen representations.

The three major themes that will be explored here are the Bumiputera affirmative action policy (Section 5.2), inter-ethnic relations (Section 5.3) and inter-ethnic romance (Section 5.4) that are featured in '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*'. I have chosen to focus on these films as they discuss at least one of these themes in depth. Where relevant, other films will be examined as well. More broadly, I will analyse the extent to which the undergraduates' filmic interpretations reflect the degree to which Islamisation impacts upon their relations with Malaysians of other ethnicities.

In this chapter, I broadly define 'social class' based on three categories; the upper class, the middle class and the working class. This definition is predicated on the occupational approach, whereby the occupation(s) of the respondents' parent(s) determine the class category they belong to. This is in accordance with the same instrument of class measurement used by researchers from the neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian traditions (Edgell 1993). In operationalising the occupational status, I refer to the seven main occupational classifications used by Malaysian statisticians that follow international practice (Rahimah 2012). In this approach, the top two classifications termed 'professional and technical' positions, as well as 'administrative and managerial' posts, represent the high and upper middle classes, respectively. On the other hand, those in the 'clerical', 'sales' and 'service' categories represent the lower middle class. Those who

work in the 'production and transportation' line fall under the working class category whereas those engaged in agricultural production belong to the lowest rung.

While I acknowledge that this measurement of class may be inadequate to capture the socio-economic conditions of Malaysians, it does reflect other social indicators that are typically encapsulated by class, including level of educational achievement. This is especially applicable to the Malaysian context, where the increase in educational opportunities following the New Economic Policy (NEP) has contributed to the emergence and growth of the Malaysian middle class in general and the improvement of the status of the Malays in particular. Indeed, in the three decades following the NEP implementation, the upper and lower middle classes have together made up 43.2 percent of Malaysia's working population in 2000, up from 23.9 percent in 1970 (Abdul Rahman 2015). To date, the middle class is estimated to comprise 51 percent of households. On the other hand, the upper class constitutes 26.6 per cent of the population whereas the working class, 22.4 per cent (Saw 2015).

The choice of using occupation as a determinant of class was also out of the practical consideration that it was more convenient for my informants to recall their parents' occupations than exact income figures. As proven in my pilot study, where I had the respondents fill in their parents' incomes on the forms that I distributed prior to the film screening session, many of them were neither able to quote the specific figures nor the range of figures, as they had no inkling of how much their parents earn. A breakdown of the respondents' class background, which I have classified according to the occupational approach, is reflected in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1: Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

Ethnicity/ Class Categories	Malays	Chinese	Indians	Non-Malay Bumiputeras	Total
Upper class	9	6	3	6	24 (25%)

Middle class	26	17	5	4	52 (54.2%)
Working class	5	5	8	2	20 (20.8%)
Total	**40**	**28**	**16**	**12**	**96 (100%)**

This chapter will demonstrate that the audience's social class backgrounds and personal experiences prove to be important determinants of the kinds of meanings that can be formed from the film viewing exercise. While the interplay of social class and ethnicity is prominent in their interpretations of the Bumiputera policy and inter-ethnic relations, it is less so for their views on inter-ethnic romance. Nevertheless, it still highlights that social identities, such as class and ethnic backgrounds, do not carry any significant meaning on their own until we examine how they bear a dialectical relationship to each other. The complexities arising from the participants' responses demonstrate that despite attempts by independent filmmakers to treat Malaysian independent films as a site where ethnic issues can be problematised, the relationship between filmmaking and audience reception is not simply a one-way street. Rather, films act as platforms where notions of social inequality are debated and negotiated.

The chapter will also argue that the impacts of Islamisation are so far-reaching that they have caused the respondents of all ethnicities to challenge the hierarchical logic of ethnicisation in Malaysia. This seems to vivify the hope for the nascent sensibility of what Yao (2003) terms as 'national cosmopolitanism', which she refers to as the entrenchment of socio-economic concerns rooted in local conditions (Yao 2003). This structure of feeling entails interests in cross-ethnic affairs within the nation-state. Yao coined this concept in response to the professionalism of the new Malay middle class or '*Melayu Baru*' who argue for the need to link the NEP and Malay privileges to broader national and economic agendas and in so doing, challenge the ethnic entrenchment that has been central to the state's ideology. Hence, unlike typical notions of cosmopolitanism that denote a commitment to universal humanism, Yao's version of cosmopolitanism is localised. Yet, in the negation of ethnicisation, the respondents inadvertently subscribe to an ethnic identity that does not extend beyond communal concerns and ethnicised boundaries. Although they did exhibit cross-ethnic concerns, communal interests that have traditionally defined the ethos of nationalism in Malaysia remain intact. Thus, for all its good intention, their sense of

cosmopolitanism comes with a set of ideologically loaded conditions, which will be elaborated in this chapter.

5.2 Interpretations of Bumiputera Policy

5.2.1 Inter-Ethnic Inequalities

The NEP was implemented in 1971 to eradicate poverty, especially among the poor Malays. However, although it is meant to offer a means of intervention in the economic sphere, the implications on the social and political realms are wide-ranging. The NEP turns out to have served the interests of the increasing presence of the Malay bourgeoisie rather than the poor Malays whom the policy has originally intended to assist. Championing the "Malay cause" has masqueraded class interests as ethnic ones. Even though the Malays experience better economic redistribution thereafter, it has not been solely due to the NEP but more as a result of a stabilising political climate, fuelled by the entrenchment of an ethnic-Malay state (Maznah 2009).

In the interests of the Malay bourgeoisie, the dichotomy between the Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras was reinforced through the rhetoric of Islam, especially when the concept of 'Malayness' was becoming blurred over time (Muzaffar 1984). Resurgent Islamic forces provide an opportunity for the state to establish exclusive Malay political power through claims to special privileges that discriminate against non-Malays. This has resulted in the increase in individual Malay piety, and the equation of 'protection of Islam' with 'protection of Malays' by certain political leaders.

The Islamisation phenomenon received a huge boost under the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, who initiated various religious institutions within government to administer Islamic practices on a national scale. Without discounting other areas in which non-Bumiputeras do not enjoy equal rights and privileges as the Malays, such as in the civil service and judicial systems, but taking into consideration the space that this dissertation affords, I will only be focusing on one aspect of social life in which the non-Malays face a high level of discrimination, which is education. As Barr and Govindasamy (2010) have argued, education is a manifestation of the state's Islamisation agenda that is both contemporary and paramount to national identity.

Furthermore, being an aspect of social life that is close to the hearts of the interlocutors implies that this could be one area in which they would be able to provide much insight into.

In my interviews with the respondents, I elicited their comments on the scenes in '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*' that problematise Bumiputera privileges. In both films, the Chinese are portrayed as the underprivileged class who have to work very hard, as the special privileges enjoyed by the Malays are not extended to them. In the words of the father of Chinese protagonist Heng in '*Gadoh*', "We Chinese have to slog like bulls. You think we are Malays? They can get anything for free- free food, free stay." The Chinese students in '*Gadoh*' also express dissatisfaction with Malay privileges when asked to voice out their suppressed emotions by the theatre instructor during the theatre practice (Figure 5.1). Disparaging remarks by the Chinese that "Malays are able to enter university even if they are not smart" are commonly evoked in the film.

Figure 5.1: During the theatre practice, the Chinese protagonist, Heng, is forced to confront the Malay protagonist, Khalil in a series of activities that require them to collaborate. The objective of the theatre practice is to encourage the students to overcome their ethnic differences.

The Malay protagonist, Khalil, who comes from an upper class background, only comes to realise his privileged position when he spots Heng helping out his father at their '*char kuay*' stall during his late night stroll and engages in a moment of self-reflection (Figure 5.2). This scene is featured immediately after Khalil overhears the conversation between his father and his business counterpart over the telephone. His father sounds pleased that

his business partner, who is a *Dato'*, has helped him to secure a business deal.[6] To cite his father's words, "If Malays do not help their own ethnic group, who else would? If we don't help each other, the Chinese would get even richer!" In a previous scene, Khalil had overheard his mother arguing with his father in an off-screen conversation. Contrary to his mother who believes that hard work is the key to success, Khalil's father insists that hard work alone is meaningless without a strong social capital, which is supported by connections with people from the same ethnic background. He also laments that in his line of work, the big projects are mostly given to the Chinese tycoons whereas the Malays only get the leftovers. Thus, his ability to clinch the business tender with the Malay *Dato*' thereafter cements his ethnicised belief.

Figure 5.2: In a poignant scene in '*Gadoh*', Khalil (extreme right) appears sorry for Heng (left) when he witnesses Heng helping out his father at their stall late at night.

Likewise, '*Sepet*' problematises this issue of Bumiputera privilege, albeit fleetingly. Orked, who hails from an upper-middle class background, has a privileged upbringing- she lives in a big two-storey terrace house and has a domestic helper. English is the main language of communication among her family members. This is unlike the working-class Jason who lives in a cosy apartment, earns a living by selling pirated DVDs, and often borrows money from loan sharks. What appears more striking is the way in which Orked's privilege is tied to her Bumiputera status. In a conversation between Orked's mother and her domestic helper, Yam, Yam expresses her disbelief when she learns that Jason, who has scored 7As in the national examination, is denied scholarship whereas

[6] '*Dato*' is an honorific title conferred to distinguished individuals in Malaysia, especially those who hold strong economic power.

Orked, who has scored only 5As, is able to obtain a scholarship to study abroad in the United Kingdom. Despite faring better in the examination, Jason ends up selling DVDs. The entwinement of class and ethnic privilege is accentuated at the end of the film when Orked gets to pursue her studies overseas whereas Jason dies in a road accident.

The juxtaposition of the privileged Malays and the working class Chinese in these two films depart from hegemonic scholarly discourses that often paint the opposite picture: that of the economically powerful Chinese and the disadvantaged Malays. Statistics on the social class breakdown of the different ethnicities in Malaysia affirm the latter scenario. As Table 5.2 shows, the Malays are economically worse off than the Chinese, with working class figure hovering at 40.1 per cent for the Malays and 29.9 per cent for the Chinese. The working class also constitutes the largest percentage of the total Malay population who are employed. On the other hand, the upper class forms the dominant group among the Chinese at 36.8 per cent. The filmic representations also overlook the internal class differences within the Bumiputera group. Among the Bumiputeras, there is a huge economic disparity between the Malays and non-Malays from the states of Sabah and Sarawak. Only 15.8 per cent of the non-Malay Bumiputeras belong to the upper class category as compared to almost twice of the percentage of Malays who are in the same category. Additionally, as high as 60.9 per cent of non-Malay Bumiputeras belong to the working class group.

Table 5.2 Percentage Distribution of Employed Malaysian Citizens Aged 15 to 64 by Ethnic Group

Ethnicity/ Class Categories	Malays	Chinese	Indians	Non-Malay Bumiputeras	Others

Upper class	31.6	36.8	31.4	15.8	16.2
Middle class	28.3	33.4	22.2	23.3	24.6
Working class	40.1	29.9	46.5	60.9	59.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Saw 2015

Furthermore, apart from the Malays and non-Malay Bumiputeras, the ethnic Indians also have a high percentage of those from the working class category at 46.5 per cent. Yet, the plight of the ethnic groups that are often featured in local films are those of the Malays and Chinese. Besides '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*', other films from the filmography that have made either explicit or subtle references to the class position of the Malays and Chinese include '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*', '29 *Februari*', '*Nasi Lemak* 2.0', 'Chocolate', '*Gubra*', '*Paloh*' and 'Spinning *Gasing*'. Based on the filmography, the only films that contain references to the underprivileged position of the ethnic Indians in Malaysia vis-à-vis other ethnic groups are the short film 'Indian Story: Hindus and Muslims', and the feature films 'Talentime' and '*Jom Gi Minum*'. While the former two films only make brief comparisons between the lives of the privileged Malays and the poor Indians in Malaysia, the third film is more elaborate in its depictions.

'*Jom Gi Minum*' or 'Let's Go For a Drink', which was produced by Pusat Komas, a human rights organisation based in Malaysia, is the only film that centres on the theme of Bumiputera privilege. The seven-minute film tells the story of Arasu, an ethnic Indian fresh graduate who faces many challenges in his job hunt due to his ethnicity. In a conversation between Arasu and his Chinese friend, Lim, Arasu laments about the fate of many Indians who can neither enter the public sector organisations that are dominated by Malays, nor the private ones that are controlled by the Chinese. He then decides to apply for a job at an Indian company based on the assumption that ethnic minorities would help one another. However, the company is only interested in hiring Malay candidates. When he finally lands himself a job months later, he befriends a Malay colleague who enjoys hanging out at the coffee shop for a drink during working hours, hence the title of the film. This colleague turns out to be a bad influence on Arasu, and when their supervisor finds out that they both

have been taking time off from work, he dismisses them from their jobs. The film is a social critique of the discriminatory Bumiputera policy, as well as those Malay Bumiputeras who have been taking their privileges for granted.

This chapter aims to explore how the respondents interpret the class variations across the different ethnicities. Specifically, it seeks to find out whether or not the respondents identify with the representations of class issues in the films, and if there are other nuances that the films may have overlooked. Before getting them to discuss the films, I first asked them the general question of the extent to which they think that the Bumiputera policy is fair to all ethnicities in Malaysia. The data in Table 5.3 below shows that only 11 out of 96, or 11.46% of the respondents thought that the policy was 'very fair' or 'fair'. An analysis of the socio-economic backgrounds of these respondents shows that 10 out of 11 of them belong to the high-income category. The reason why so many respondents from the high-income background, particularly non-Malays, felt this way will be discussed in the next sub-section. Overall, as many as 79 out of 96 (82.3%) respondents across all ethnic and income groups criticised the policy and thought that it was either 'unfair' or 'very unfair'. Six of them, a negligible 6.25%, were neutral about it.

Table 5.3: Respondents' Attitudes Towards Bumiputera Policy

Attitude/ Ethnicity*	M	M	M	C	C	C	I	I	I	N	N	N	Total
Class	High	Middle	Working	High	Middle	Working	High	Middle	Working	High	Middle	Working	-

Very fair	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 (2.08%)
Fair	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	5	0	0	9 (9.38%)
Neutral	2	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	6 (6.25%)
Unfair	3	14	2	2	6	2	0	2	2	0	2	1	36 (37.5%)
Very unfair	3	11	2	1	10	2	2	3	6	1	1	1	43 (44.8%)
Total	**9**	**26**	**5**	**6**	**17**	**5**	**3**	**5**	**8**	**6**	**4**	**2**	**96 (100%)**

* 'M' stands for Malays, 'C' for Chinese, 'I' for Indians and 'N' for Non-Malay Bumiputeras

Those who felt strongly about the unfairness of the policy against non-Malays mostly come from the working class background. I cite the remarks by some of the Indian students from this income category, namely Uma, Durga and Gopal below, respectively. Uma and Durga are focus group participants from Group D, an all-Indian group whereas Gopal is from Group A, a group made up of himself, one Sabahan Dusun student and four Malay students.

> What the Chinese student said in '*Gadoh'* about Malay students is real. A public university in Malaysia can reject a non-Malay student with 10As. But if a Malay student fails a subject, the same university, same course can still accept him.

> My sister got 11As in her SPM, wants to study Chemical Engineering in a public university but cannot get a scholarship because the scholarship is only given to the Malays. It's like they (the government) don't appreciate our achievements. You know what? The only time when more non-Malays get those kind of opportunities is during general election. Before election, non-Malays must get 9As and above to qualify for scholarships. During election, if they get 6 or 7As only, they qualify.

> What is shown in the film '*Jom Gi Minum*' is true. It's true that most public sectors only want to employ Malays. Chinese have their own business. That is why after my brother graduated from university, he went to look for a job in Singapore. He is enjoying life there. There, the salary is better. There is no racism also, unlike here.

The Chinese respondents from the working class backgrounds also agreed with the discrimination against non-Bumiputeras as featured in '*Gadoh*'. My discussion with Group G from University of Malaya (UM), as quoted below, epitomises this. In the following excerpt, Mila and Niza are Malay students from working and middle class backgrounds, respectively, whereas Nam is a Chinese student from a working class household.

> Mila: I really, really hate the fact that we Malays are given more privileges. I got into Foundation Programme but I was really sad and embarrassed because other ethnic groups like Indians got straight 'A's but didn't get what they choose. Where is the fairness in that?! The upper power keeps saying non-Bumiputeras also get privileges but that's not true!
>
> Nam: Yeah we always think that Chinese and Malays are given equal rights but after Form 5, after secondary school, when we (Chinese) start applying for scholarship, then we start seeing this problem. I ask myself, why? Why I get 11As but I can't get JPA scholarship?
>
> Me: What's JPA?
>
> Nam: Scholarship from government.
>
> Me: What's the full name for it?
>
> Niza: *Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam* (Public Service Commission)

Nam: There's a quota for that. Chinese will start asking, why I get more 'As' than Malays but I can't get a scholarship to study in Germany?

Me: So where would these Chinese who can't get government scholarship end up in?

Nam: University of Malaya (Followed by boisterous laughter from the rest).

The participants' responses affirm studies that point to the discrimination against non-Bumiputeras in national schools, especially with regard to access to scholarships and admission into public universities. As it stands, UiTM, with a student population of 170,000 in 2011, only enrols Bumiputeras while the other 19 public universities have an overwhelming enrolment of Malay students (Kua 2015). Discrimination against students along ethnic lines in competitive courses prevails even though decades have passed since the abolishment of the ethnic quota system. For instance, only a few places in medical faculties in public universities are made available to non-Malays (Kua 2015). Such discriminatory policies are further institutionalised through the lack of transparency in the award of scholarships, university admission criteria, choice of courses, as well as study loans.

An interesting finding highlights that despite being discriminated against by the Bumiputera policy, a considerable percentage of ethnic minorities from the working class background argued that the films have overstated the unfairness of the policy. Specifically, 4 out of 5 Chinese, 6 out of 8 Indians, and all the 2 non-Malay Bumiputeras, or a total of 80% of non-Malay respondents from these class categories felt this way. This attitude is consistent among those minorities I interviewed, be it among the individual interviewees or focus group participants from multi-ethnic or same-ethnic groups, which suggests that this could be a genuine sentiment shared by those minorities from this class category.

According to them, while the policy reflects the government's failure in ensuring equality across ethnicities, there are certain financial schemes that demonstrate the

government's commitment in addressing the *immediate* needs of the less well-off citizens regardless of ethnicity. This is exemplified through aid schemes that have helped to alleviate the participants' financial burden, such as the '*Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia*' or 'BR1M 4.0', which provides financial assistance to families from lower-income households, and single people aged 21 years and above who earn less than RM2000 per month. I was alerted to the exaggeration of the policy's unfairness on-screen when I spoke with Geeta, an Indian student from a working class background whom I interviewed individually. Geeta's posture of impartiality towards national politics did not waver during our interview, as cited in the excerpt below:

> Me: What are your thoughts on the 'Bumiputera' policy in Malaysia?
>
> Geeta: All the government actions have a reason behind it so the society should accept it.
>
> Me: So you don't have any issues with the policy?
>
> Geeta: I believe that the government does something good for us. They treat us in a well-mannered and fair way through BR1M.
>
> Me: What's BR1M?
>
> Geeta: *Bantuan Rakyat Satu Malaysia*. It's for families whose income is below RM2000 per month. The government will give them RM900 in a year… Since my mum is a single mum, my main focus now is to finish my degree and take care of my mum.

Other ethnic minorities from the working class category even claimed that their deprivation of the Bumiputera privileges is in fact, a blessing in disguise. Sue, a Chinese student from Group G, a multi-ethnic group, articulated her view as follows:

> Actually, I see the quota system according to race as a good challenge. It is a motivation for me so that I can try and compete

> with others. True, we Chinese may not get the privilege. But on the bright side, we can use this lack of opportunity to prove to other races that we are also capable.

In an effort to instill dignity and challenge the unequal policy, the Chinese students resist the way in which the policies have entrenched discrimination between the ethnicities by putting up a competitive edge along ethnic lines as well. Most of the Chinese students whom I interviewed made it a point to highlight their condescending attitude towards the educational standard of their Malay counterparts, which is a sore reminder that the Bumiputera policy has not successfully transformed the competitive field for the Malays. Tasha, an individual interviewee, who is cited below, shares this sentiment:

> I have this Malay friend who always offered to photocopy notes for me even when I didn't ask her to. Turns out that she wanted me to teach her how to write an essay outline. I told her, I can't do that. Not that I'm selfish or what. But she has to earn her degree through her own hard work and not rely on other people!

Nurul, a Malay respondent from Group K, an all-Malay group, who lamented about how stressful it is to be studying in University of Malaya especially in a class where there are many Chinese students, validates the stiff competition between the Malays and Chinese:

> If you have the opportunity to 'crash' a class in UM, you will notice that when the lecturer is teaching, the Chinese will always ask questions and share their opinions during the lecture. But the Malays will only meet the lecturer at the end of the class. This gives a very challenging environment to us. Maybe certain Malays want to enter UiTM because they don't want to face that competition. There's less challenge there.

The non-Malay students were also against any further problematisation of the Bumiputera policy in the media due to concerns that it might aggravate inter-ethnic

relations in the country. These are the same students who had qualms about discussing ethnicity initially, as they felt that any attempt to complicate ethnic issues should be left to the discretion of the authorities. The concern of an Indian student from a working class background, Gayatri, is expressed below:

> It's very political. Politics should be thrown out of the window. It should be discussed among the ministers. We (lay people) prefer to live in a harmonious environment. So we don't prefer to talk about the negative aspects of race. Just stick to the positive ones like inter-cultural costumes, food.

Corinna, a Chinese student from the same income category also expressed a similar point:

> You can't fight for your rights! You can never fight for your rights in Malaysia. Politics belong to the politicians. We leave all the talk about race to them.

I argue that assertions of equal opportunities among working class ethnic minorities are fraught with heightened ambivalence that symbolically negate unjust state ideologies of Malay supremacy but at the same time legitimise a political system committed to uneven economic growth divided along ethnic lines. The subordination of their fate among the lower class can be explained by how they are caught between the desire for justice and the pressure to assimilate into Malaysia's multi-ethnic society. This is aligned with Willford's (2007) concept of "ethnic fetishism", in which he contends that, "…ideological complicity is produced in multi-ethnic societies governed by an ethnic system of separation" (Willford 2007:117). The way in which respondents like Geeta and Gayatri conform to the state rhetoric of multi-ethnicity that does not encourage the questioning of differential opportunities for the sake of ethnic harmony highlights this ethnic fetishism. The yearning for equality and the simultaneous desire to be recognised as Malaysian citizens are both generated in the ambivalent shadow of Islamic hegemony. Yet, although the respondents may be contented with such financial assistance schemes as BRIM, the transient nature of these forms of aid, which pale in comparison with those that the Bumiputera privileges

offer, only serve to reinscribe ethnicised hierarchies between the Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras.

Respondents from the lower income groups were not the only ones who expressed dissatisfaction with the Bumiputera policy. Students of other class categories also vent out their frustrations towards the policy for its discriminatory practice against ethnic minorities. The excerpt below reflects the views of Haliza, a Malay individual interviewee from a high-income background who has just returned to Malaysia after studying in the United States:

> When I was studying in the US under a government scholarship, a local Chinese friend of mine who didn't get the same scholarship told me his mum actually sold off her plot of land just to get him to the US. He said, you Malays are very lucky. When he learnt that I wanted to change course from Actuarial Science to Economics, he said I was ungrateful. That gave me a deep thought. Bumiputeras are getting all these privileges but not all of us are using it wisely. Some of us take things for granted.

Respondents of middle class background across all ethnic groups also expressed strong views towards the policy. Respondents like Indian student Sandeep and Malay student Syamirol, whose comments are found below, represent the general sentiments of the middle class:

> I have watched '*Jom Gi Minum'* before on Astro channel and agree with what was being portrayed in it. We Indians are always left behind because of policies like the Bumiputera policy and other government policy. Even though the Chinese are also left out, they have their own business. So they are not so much affected. That is why the Indian guy (main character Arasu) said that the politics in this country belong to the Malays, and economy belongs to the Chinese. But we Indians, what do we have?

> All the films are trying to show that the Bumiputera policy is unfair, which is true. The government always says Malays will be their first priority, they will help Malays through Bumiputera policy, this and that. But the truth is, we Malays also face financial hardship!

Their strident voices represent the critical attitudes of broader sections of middle class Malaysians towards unjust social and political systems. Being young, educated and technologically savvy in searching for alternative sources of information, they epitomise the growing influence of the middle class on the country's political sphere. Even though the struggle against state oppression of minority groups has been put up mainly by the minorities in the country, it is the middle class Malaysians in general that bears a stronger political clout to effect real changes to the political scene. This category of Malaysians belongs to various ethnicities. Making up about half of the country's voting strength, their critical stance towards the ruling coalition had affected the outcomes of general elections, especially the 12th one in 2008, where the Barisan Nasional (BN) only garnered 49% of the popular vote in Peninsular Malaysia, suffered an unprecedented setback and lost the states of Kedah, Kelantan, Penang, Perak and Selangor to the opposition parties (Rahimah 2012). Although UMNO's performance in the 13th General Election improved slightly in 2013, component parties of BN, including the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GERAKAN) performed poorly as a growing middle class and a disenchanted urban working class from all ethnic groups voted for the opposition party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). While BN regained the state of Perak, PKR garnered huge votes from Selangor and Pulau Pinang as middle class and urban electorates from all ethnic groups moved away from BN (Mohd Azizuddin 2014). On the other hand, the struggles for democratic rights by ethnic minorities have only been met with strong resistance by state institutions. For instance, the demonstration put up by more than 20,000 ethnic Indians led by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) in the streets of Kuala Lumpur on 25th November 2007 was violently dissolved by the police using tear gas and water cannons (Kua 2015). Over 400 demonstrators were arrested both before and during the rally.

However, a close examination of their responses indicates that negotiations of class issues by the middle class keep the core values of ethnicity firmly in place. Rather than critiquing the *abuse* within the Bumiputera policy system by the political elites, respondents like Sandeep and Syamirol lamented about the impacts of the uneven policy distribution on their respective ethnicities instead. Syamirol's remarks even tacitly acknowledge claims of Malay supremacy and his Bumiputera entitlements. Expressions of resentment with the policy were informed more by the urge to advance the rights of one's ethnic group rather than the motivation to address the flaws of the system. This shows that the entrenchment of ethnic differences brought about by intense state-led Islamisation aimed at strengthening Malay hegemony has not extended their concerns for class issues beyond those that impinge on their own ethnicity.

5.2.2 Intra-Ethnic Inequalities

Concerns about their respective ethnic groups can be explained by the unequal benefits of the Bumiputera policy. Scholars like Shamsul and Athi (2015) and Zawawi (2013) have cautioned against adopting a homogenising view of the dominant Bumiputera category given the intra-ethnic class inequalities within this group. Indeed, studies have shown that although the level of poverty among all ethnic groups has been reduced in the last decade, it is still high among the Malays and non-Malay Bumiputeras, notably those living in the rural areas, with the incidence rate of poverty for some indigenous Bumiputera groups exceeding 40% (Joseph 2014; Kua 2015; Shamsul and Athi 2015). While much of the global literature on identities that employ a cultural class analysis have emphasised the tensions between middle class and working class identities (Mendez 2008; Wayne 2016), there is a gap in research on the horizontal differentiation within each class. This applies to the Malaysian context as well, where the Bumiputera category has often been misunderstood as being synonymous with the Malay middle-class. The findings however, affirm the heterogeneous nature of the 'Bumiputera' category. Those Malay respondents and non-Malays from Sabah and Sarawak of working class origins, who have expressed disagreement with the juxtaposition of rich Malays with working class Chinese in '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*', best illustrate this. The assertion of a Malay student from a

working class background, Syazni, is representative of the sentiments of those from the same income category. As Syazni commented:

> In '*Gadoh*', Heng's father tells him to work hard because the special privileges go to the Malays. But I don't agree that we Malays are getting all the privileges. Because there is a class hierarchy in our system. For example, unless you have insider contacts, then it's not easy for you to get the privileges. And if you come from a middle-class family and want to put in request for financial aid, you have to wait very long to apply for documentation. After my dad passed away, my mum is not working, so we apply for financial aid that the government claims will help Malays. But we had to apply many times for it. The officer kept coming to our house to investigate. They question how come we have TV, Astro Channel when we are supposed to be poor. But that TV was bought by my late father! Without him, who's going to pay for our car? In the end, we didn't get the aid.

The responses of students from East Malaysia also reflect the hierarchical reality behind the concept of 'Bumiputera'. Those who lamented about the underrepresentation of East Malaysians in films are mostly non-Muslims. The fact that non-Muslims form the majority of Bumiputera in Sabah and Sarawak explain why they do not enjoy as much privileges as the Malays in West Malaysia (Zawawi 2013). Jemimah, a Christian student of Sabahan Dusun ethnicity, highlights this:

> Even though you may have the title of 'bumiputera', they (the government) will treat you as if you are sort of last choice people. This is a very sensitive matter for Sabahans and Sarawakians. If you want to get a better position, you have to become someone else. You have to leave your old identity behind. For example, you have to become Muslims. You have to follow what the upper people (authorities) say, just to get a better position and a better chance of education. Currently, for people of Sabah and Sarawak, we are being pressured by all these kinds of things. So even though we are called 'bumiputera', the

> privileges we have is not as much as Malays. The government view us as 'special cases' people.

Interestingly, among the ethnic minorities from the high-income groups, some of the findings reflect the assumption that the inequalities emerging from the Bumiputera policy occur naturally and unproblematically. Specifically, 3 out of 6 ethnic Chinese, 1 ethnic Indian and 5 out of 6 non-Malay Bumiputeras, or a total of 60% of non-Malay respondents from this class category shared this view. Their responses indicate that the division of educational and employment opportunities along ethnic lines is not an issue to them because they are economically self-sufficient and do not need the government's financial support. For instance, Tom, a Chinese Sarawakian, mentioned:

> Yes, I'm aware that Chinese don't get as many scholarships as the Malays, but I don't find that an issue. It's not a big issue, to me at least. As a matter of fact, most Chinese families don't care about the scholarship because most of us can afford our education.

Others downplayed the ethnic exclusivity of the unequal access to government scholarships. An ethnic Chinese interviewee, Ken, who has been travelling to various cities in Germany for language immersion programmes with the financial support of his parents, is one of those who felt this way. Ken, who is cited below, also denied the representation of poor Chinese, as portrayed in '*Sepet*':

> The quota system for entry into public uni is actually justifiable and reasonable. It is proportionate to the national percentage of the races in Malaysia... '*Sepet*' shows Jason as a pirated DVD seller. It seems like many Malaysian movies like to portray Chinese as poor DVD sellers. But in actual fact, many Chinese are engaged in business. Yes, they sell DVDs and other gadgets, but they do that in shopping malls, not as pirated sellers.

Ken's response on the equitable distribution of quotas for different ethnic groups is unfounded. It contradicts recent statistics, which prove that an unfair educational system still persists. According to Kua (2015), following the 13th General Election

(GE13) on 5th May 2013, ruling party UMNO gave only 19 and 4 per cent of places in the public universities to Chinese and Indian students respectively, even though these two ethnic groups combined comprised 30 per cent of Malaysia's total student population. Kua (2015) postulates that this policy implementation is a form of UMNO's retaliation against the non-Malays for supporting the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition during GE13, where UMNO only garnered 47.38 per cent of the popular vote against 50.87 per cent for PR.

In addition, the NEP's success in nurturing a class of Malay bourgeoisie has also resulted in a rising intra-ethnic inequality in Malaysia's higher education industry. Children of the Malay elites often obtain the most sought after scholarships, especially for overseas study whereas qualified Malay students from the lower-income groups, particularly from the rural areas, usually end up studying in local public institutions (Lee 2013). Likewise, the privatisation of higher education has also resulted in class inequality among the non-Malays. While the upper classes can afford costly programmes in foreign university branches in Malaysia, the rest will either end up in less popular courses in local public universities, or for those who have opted for private education, be mired in high debts at the end of their tertiary education following the borrowing of hefty amount of study loans to fund their studies.

Such educational inequities render Ken's denial of Chinese involvement in illicit DVD sales fallacious. While there are no official statistics on the attrition rate among the Chinese students, a study commissioned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) in 2005 reported that approximately 25 per cent of the 99,000 UPSR Chinese students surveyed who went on to Forms Four and Five between 1997 and 2002 dropped out of school prior to completing their secondary school education (Lee 2012).[7] Although a recent study by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) cited that the dropout rate of both Chinese and Tamil students before secondary level have fallen to 2.9 per cent, the absolute figure of 14,396 students remains high (Mayuri 2015). Studies have shown that the biggest setback for Chinese students lies in the command of language as they make the transition from Chinese medium primary school to Malay medium secondary school.

[7] 'UPSR' is the Malay acronym for Primary School Education Test.

While some dropouts acquire new skills under programmes by the MCA, participate in various apprenticeships in trade and craft businesses, a significant number of them have either ended up in menial jobs or turned to illicit activities, including peddling pirated DVDs (Lee 2012).

Thus, based on the responses of high-income undergraduates like Tom and Ken, I argue that just like the ethnic minorities from the low-income groups, those from the high-income categories are also caught in an ambivalent position in the light of the ethnicised discourse attached to working class minorities. Ethnic Chinese and Indians especially often feel displaced in Malaysia where they have little political power and in which they suffer from a stigma attached to their ethnicity. Borrowing from Freud's notion of self-reflexive ego, the superego is reflected on a self-reflective subject, which in this context, is embodied by the well-to-do ethnic minorities. The Self, as Freud asserts, is produced within matrices of power, in which the perceptions of others, in this case the Malays, constitute part of the ambivalent self-image. Power, class, status and ideologies mediate the dialectic between the Self and Other such that the elite sections of non-Malays feel a conscious sense of ambivalence when articulating ethnic-based sentiments. On the one hand, they recognise the discrimination against their ethnicity through the unjust policies. Yet on the other, the desire to prove the self-worth of their ethnic community necessitates an attempt to distance themselves from the structures of the lower class produced by ethnic politics.

5.3 Inter-Ethnic Relations in Films

5.3.1 Views of High-Income and Working Class Respondents

This section further interrogates if the interviewees' class background has any influence on their interpretation of the inter-ethnic relations between the characters in '*Gadoh*'. It seeks to examine the extent to which the inter-ethnic tensions in the film represent everyday lived realities in Malaysian schools. Generally, the respondents agreed that the ethnic tension in '*Gadoh*' is truly representative of that in the high schools they have attended, be it in *Sekolah Kebangsaan* (SK) or *Sekolah Jenis*

Kebangsaan (SJK).[8] Fighting incidents in Malaysian secondary schools are rampant and critical, as the incidents that happen in some of my informants' schools have made headlines in the local newspaper before. In other schools, the tension was so high that the police had to be called in and guard the school premises. Those students who were involved in repeated offenses faced disciplinary consequences, such as public caning and expulsion. Despite the severity of racism in schools, the teachers do not take drastic actions to tackle the problem. The respondents commented that this lack of action by the school authorities is emblematic of the situation in '*Gadoh*', where the teachers are more interested in boosting the schools' ranking than in looking after the welfare of the students.

Among respondents of various class positions, it was the well-to-do Malay students who highlighted that the social institutions of the family and the school had a huge influence on their attitude towards inter-ethnic relations. 6 out of 9 Malay students from the high-income category acknowledged that they were once racist. However, their socialisation experience subsequently improved their perception towards other ethnicities. The experience of a Malay interviewee, Fuad, testifies to this. Fuad, whose father owns a resort in the state of Johor, informed me that he was able to relate to Khalil's hatred towards the Chinese in '*Gadoh*' after his family's business suffered a similar fate to Khalil's father's. Khalil develops racist sentiments against the Chinese after learning that Chinese businessmen have overtaken his father's potential business projects. His ethnic prejudice is dismantled only after a series of everyday encounters that make him realise that his racist sentiments are mostly unfounded. These encounters include the scene in which he bumps into Heng at the latter's *char kuay* stall, as alluded to above, and where he observes a Chinese lady helping a blind Malay man cross the road. Like Khalil, Fuad's attitude towards other ethnicities is shaped by his family background and socialisation experience. According to Fuad:

> '*Gadoh*' teaches us the importance of not judging others based on skin colour. I have to admit that I myself didn't like the Chinese. My Dad had a hard time maintaining his business because the Chinese dominated the area where our family

[8] SK refers to Malay-medium school whereas SJK refers to non-Malay-medium national school.

> resort was located. There was stiff competition with the Chinese. But after I got to know a few nice Chinese, my perception towards them changed. Like, when I was playing online games like 'SDO' and 'Mission Against Terror', which are dominated by Chinese gamers, whenever I am out of credit, it is the Chinese who helped me top up to 'buy items'. When there's a tournament, I get to meet them in person. They're also nice in person.

Another Malay student who hails from an upper-class family, Raikal, also proves that the relationship between class position and attitude towards ethnicity is not static but changes with time. As Raikal remarked:

> When I watch '*Gadoh*', what I see is reality. When I was in Form 1 and 2, I always fight with the Indian students in my school. I was very racist towards Indians. They always call Malays '*bodoh*' (stupid) and '*pemalas*' (lazy), so we call them '*pariah*' (outcast). The fights in my school happen about five times a year. When I was in Form 3, I realise there are actually nice Indians out there. I realise this when three Indians help my Malay friend when he was beaten by another Malay friend. That got me thinking, why must I be racist? People of the same race can also backstab one another.

Raikal did not make any reference to his upbringing when accounting for his racist attitude. Instead, based on the above excerpt, his prejudice seems to have stemmed from his personal resentment towards the Indians. Nonetheless, the fact that Raikal is one of the three undergraduates who have been involved in physical fighting in high school makes him stand out among the respondents. A closer examination of two of the other students' profiles shows that both are from high-income backgrounds. One of them is also Malay whereas the other is Chinese. All three students have attended *Sekolah Kebangsaan*, the national school. A comparison between how these students and those from the other income groups interpreted the fighting scenes highlights

that class position and ethnic background are two major factors that hinder ethnic minorities from middle and working class backgrounds from engaging in fights in schools despite getting offended at racist remarks hurled at them. My interview with an Indian student from a working class background, Durga, illustrates this point. In narrating her experience while in high school, she mentioned:

> My Vice Principal in secondary school is a Chinese. Even though the three races- Chinese, Malay, Indians have disciplinary problems, she will pin point the Indians. She will expel Indians from the school because of disciplinary issues. As we know, the Malays have worse disciplinary problems than the Indians but they don't get expelled. Quite racist. Quite a number of final year Indian students were expelled. So can you imagine if they have a public exam in two or three months' time, how do you expect these students to find another school? Most of us don't come from rich families. So it's really not worth it to cause trouble in school.

What is manifest in Durga's narrative are the multiple layers of discrimination faced by minority ethnic groups from underprivileged backgrounds in Malaysia. On one level, they are marginalised based on their minority status in the country. On another, they are subject to structural constraints that further entrench their underprivileged socio-economic position, leaving them powerless to challenge any unjust policies and forcing them to consign to their fate. Unlike these minorities, Malay students from economically advantaged households like Raikal are able to act more spontaneously because the consequences are less dire given their ethnic privilege and economic status. The chances of Raikal to be expelled from school if he were to get caught in a fight are lower than if a non-Malay were to engage in the same act. Even if Raikal gets expelled, his parents have the financial ability to pay the exorbitant school fees of a private school. However, not everyone would have this choice, especially the less privileged.

The same students cited above also expressed liking for the film '*Gadoh*', as they felt that the way in which the characters overcome their racist sentiments resemble their own struggle. I quote Raikal's response below:

> I've watched '*Gadoh*' many times already, like more than 10 times. It's a really, really good movie. It has a lot of moral values... I got to know about this movie by chance when my friends and I *lepak* (were hanging out) at my home. I've shared this movie with my other friends and encouraged them to watch it because it can help to remove racist thoughts.

Another student, Aziz, whose father is also a businessman like Fuad's, enjoyed '*Gadoh*' for the same reason:

> '*Gadoh*' is a good movie. I'm saying this because it is more realistic than other films about race in Malaysia, like 'KL Gangster'. 'KL Gangster' is about how Chinese and Malays engage with business dealings with each other. But the ethnic tension is made up. In reality, Chinese and Malay businessmen can work well together. At first I thought Chinese and Malays can't work together. But when my Dad's business partner, a Chinese, whom he had earlier collaborated with on a project, approached me just to express his admiration for my Dad for not looking at skin colour, it changed my perception of Chinese-Malay relations. But the tension in '*Gadoh*' is real. Even though there are fewer fights in school now, they are still happening.

In contrast to the Malay political elites who are working towards ethnic segregation, the Malay respondents from the upper class backgrounds have proven that the ethnic chauvinists are not representative of all the Malay elites in the country. Moreover,

they have also shown how over time, the ethnicised borders maintained and reinforced by the state can be appropriated for forging better inter-ethnic ties through positive cross-cultural encounters.

In contrast to the Malays from the upper class background, ethnic minorities from the same class category generally denied that the ethnic tension in '*Gadoh*' are representative of the multi-ethnic mosaic of Malaysia. My discussion with Group B, which consists of four Malays and two Indians, exemplifies this point. In the following excerpt, Indian student Mohan hails from an upper class family whereas the rest of his friends, Arvind, another Indian student, and Anuar, a Malay student, are from middle-income households. Mohan attended an SK school in Bangsar, which is a wealthy suburb on the outskirts of KL. The area is popular among expatriates and has the largest concentration of English-speaking and affluent Indians (Willford 2007). Mohan's friends also went to SKs but the schools were situated in various locations in the suburbs and cities in other less-developed states, namely, Kelantan for Arvind and Terengganu for Anuar.

> Anuar: '*Gadoh*' shows what is really happening in Malaysia. In the film, it shows Malays and Chinese fighting. But back in my secondary school, the fights happened between Malays and Indians.
>
> Arvind: Yeah what he (Anuar) said is true. If you go to certain parts of KL, you will encounter this also. If there's a group of Indian guys (who belong to a gang), and then there's a group of Malay guys, if one person from the group stare at another person from the group, then a fight will break out for sure.
>
> Mohan: Fighting incident between races may be common, but we should not take that as what is happening all the time between the races in Malaysia. I mean, there is hatred, but there is love as well.
>
> Arvind: *Aiyah* (sub-standard English to indicate exasperation). What does he (Mohan) know about racism? He comes from a good school.

> Anuar: Yeah. His school don't [sic] have all these fights.
>
> Me: Is that true Mohan?
>
> Mohan: (smiles) Well, yeah, I mean, there are no fights in my school. But what I'm trying to say is, Malays and Indians don't fight all the time. There are more peaceful Indians than rowdy Indians out there. Although we are a marginalised community, we know our place in society. We don't cause trouble in public.

An individual interview with a Chinese student Joseph, who is also from an upper-class background, highlights a similar sentiment. According to Joseph:

> In my opinion, the director of '*Gadoh*' should focus more on the positive relationship between the Chinese and Malays rather than showing the negative side. 'Cos in real life, Chinese and Malays can also be friends. Like for example, I also have Malay friends. My Malay friends also *lepak* (hang out) at my house. Another thing is that films like '*Gadoh*' like to portray us (Chinese) as *ah bengs* (gangsters), but not all Chinese behave like *ah bengs*. When you look at me, do I look like an *ah beng* to you? (He obviously does not if one were to judge him based on his clean-cut and well-groomed image!)

The responses of those minorities who hail from the upper class background on inter-ethnic relations validate their position on the Bumiputera policy. The conscious effort of the upper class in distancing themselves from the stereotype of the "rowdy Indians" and "*ah beng* Chinese" as highlighted by Mohan and Joseph reflects their concern with the position of ethnic minorities in the nationalist imaginary of state-sponsored Islamisation, which often legitimises the place of Islam through the notion of superiority that accords other ethnicities a derogatory or less-than-equal status. One way in which respondents like Joseph challenge the construction of stereotypical

Chinese imagery in mainstream media is by highlighting his social status as embodied by his outward appearance.

The non-Malay elites are not the only ones who felt that the ethnic conflicts portrayed in '*Gadoh*' are unrepresentative of their everyday lived experience. Those ethnic minorities from the working class households also felt the same way. In addition to that, they are generally of the opinion that ethnic issues should not be discussed openly, which is consistent with the views of those from the same social class background regarding the Bumiputera policy. In response to my question on how they relate to the ethnic stereotypes and name-calling in '*Gadoh*', an Indian interviewee, Devi, disagreed that ethnic hatred exists in Malaysia and even went far to assert that, "We are '1 Malaysia'. There is no racism in Malaysia". Other interviewees, such as Chinese students Huijun, and Nam commented in a very defensive tone, as respectively cited below:

> '*Gadoh*''s dialogue actually surprised me- it's too straightforward! I don't really notice that as a problem within us. It's a taboo! We never say it out loud. It's a taboo, so I think it's better left being unsaid. This movie shows the stereotypical mind of the different races. But not all Chinese are '*ah longs'* (loansharks), not all Malays are lazy. And not all Chinese and Malays hate each other. This movie actually worsens the condition! They are focusing too much on the negative things! In my life, I don't encounter that kind of racial problems. Chinese and Malays are just normal friends!

> The film shouldn't be too straightforward. If outsiders from other country watch this film, it will give a bad perspective about Malaysia. It may be true, but not nice to be seen by other people (non-Malaysian citizens).

I argue that these respondents' denial of racism portrayed in the films is once again informed by their ambivalent positions as poor yet educated ethnic minorities. Their minority status, which is exacerbated by structural constraints, have entrenched their disadvantaged socio-economic position. Yet, being educated citizens implies that they

are not naïve as to cast their country in a negative light to an outsider like me by accentuating the deep entrenchment of ethnic difference in Malaysia. Being educated also means that they have a heightened awareness of avoiding comments that are deemed ethnically insensitive during the interviews despite acknowledging that certain filmic representations resemble their day-to-day experiences. Therefore, to reinforce the perception that they are not racist, they have chosen to identify themselves as belonging to a unified Malaysia rather than to distinct ethnic communities.

One way in which they have underscored their assimilation into the larger Malay society is to express comments that identify with the state's '*Melayu Baru*' (New Malay) discourse, which is a fundamental feature of Malaysia's Vision 2020. Although this was not mentioned explicitly in the interviews, their attempt to naturalise ethnicised boundaries demonstrates this. The NEP has resulted in the emergence of highly educated professionals and managers, including Malay capitalists termed as the 'new Malay middle class' who are largely responsible for the political dismantling of ethnic-based aspects of the NEP (Chong 2005; Saravanamuttu 2013). In line with the cosmopolitan sensibilities implied by the discourse, Asiaweek magazine in 2001 has even defined the 'new Malaysian Malay' as someone who is "young, contemporary, modern", "knows how to live with a diversity of beliefs… accepts and even celebrates that diversity" and "finds his place in the world" (Chong 2005:573). Thus, articulating any comments that reflect ethnic intolerance and prejudice would signify backwardness in the ideology of Islamic modernism, which often imposes claims of "progress" and "rationality" (Willford 2007).

5.3.2 Views of Middle-Class Respondents

The ability to draw upon ideological discourses and articulate critical views of the films is significant for the middle-class respondents from UM, who aligned independent films like '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*' with high-status cultural forms. Among these students, the choice of watching independent films over mainstream ones is conceptualised as a form of cultural capital. The students perceived consuming independent films that often seek to engage the audience with critical political discourses as an embodiment of intellectuality. They took pride in discussing at length films that present alternative views to mainstream films, especially those that seek to

deconstruct ethnic stereotypes and prejudices. Their identification with these films can be understood as acts of middle-class value accrual in line with Bourdieu's (1984) arguments regarding the formation of social classes.

Scholars who have adopted a cultural class analysis in their studies have relied on some of Bourdieu's concepts on class to address the intricate links between lived experience, social class and identity. In line with Tak's (2010) study that theorises the relations between social status and cultural consumption through six case study countries, I argue that the cultural consumption of the middle class respondents is more influenced by their status relations rather than class identities. Hailing from a public university like UM confers the UM students a greater sense of prestige than their counterparts from private institutions since it is more competitive to earn a spot in the former. In their interpretations of '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*', I notice that students from UM would often make a conscious attempt to express critical views of the films. In highlighting the belief that the consumption of independent films requires specific kinds of appreciation, middle-class respondents from UM demonstrate that the mode of relating to culture may be more important in the interplay of distinction than the choice of cultural objects themselves. This is exemplified by the interjection of respondents from the focus groups who frequently sought validation from me during the course of the interviews to find out whether or not they have expressed views that would help shape my sociological understanding of the topics. Additionally, at the end of one of the focus groups, after learning that the other institution I went to for fieldwork is Unitar International University, they were interested to know if Unitar students had raised similar critical points as they had. Such a mode of relating to the films resembles Bourdieu's (1984) notion of 'embodied cultural capital', which is mobilised when high-status individuals utilise the social resources linked to 'legitimate' aesthetic dispositions.

The UM undergraduates' perception of their high awareness of social issues can be explained by the broader structural forces that have come to organise public universities. Student organisations are more established and active in public universities in organising social movements that respond to local and global concerns. At times, organisation of these activities also receives strong support from the faculty members, like in the case of the protest in support of Dr. Azmi Sharom, who was

charged under the Sedition Act in 2014. To underscore the importance of embodied cultural capital in relation to audience reception of independent films, the respondents' discussion of '*Gadoh*' illuminate the centrality of distinctive consumption practices. The response of Chinese student Alex, as quoted below, typifies the critical views of middle-class students from UM:

> The film '*Gadoh*' shows the true Malaysia, what we face in our daily lives. This film is really about the situation I faced when I was in high school. In my school, a *Sekolah Kebangsaan*, there are two gangs. Malays and Chinese. They always fight and say racist comments, like '*Cina makan babi*' (Chinese who eat pork) and Malays are 'lazy'. Even now in university, we face this kind of problem. Yes, '*Gadoh*' may seem like it is promoting racial harmony. But if you look closely, only the gang leaders, Heng and Khalil become friends with each other after they set aside their racial differences. But for others, they become friends because their gang leaders are nice towards each other, and so they follow. '*Gadoh*' shows that Chinese and Malay can be together. But it doesn't show that they can be good friends.

In addition, the UM respondents' interpretations also reflect their hope that the independent films would leave a broader impact on society. In expressing agreement with how closely the ethnic tension in '*Gadoh*' resembles their high school experience, the undergraduates from the middle-income households across all ethnic groups lauded '*Gadoh*''s attempt at foregrounding ethnic issues. As one Chinese informant Steven, and a Malay respondent, Aris astutely observed:

> '*Gadoh*' is provocative as it teaches us to have an understanding of other races, that we should not have a preconceived thought about other races. More films like '*Gadoh*' should be produced as it sheds light on racial issues and gives people who don't understand other races new perspective of things.

> When you said that we were going to watch '*Gadoh*', it made me miss my high school days. I was also teasing the other races, just like the students in '*Gadoh*', but not to the extent of fighting. Even before you made us watch this film, I already know about it when I was browsing for videos about racism for an assignment. I read good reviews about the film online. I myself think that this film should be shown to other Malaysians, especially secondary school students so they won't be racist like the students in '*Gadoh*'.

Nonetheless, it would be too simplistic to deduce that the forms of embodied cultural capital exhibited by my respondents from UM and Unitar are reflected in the difference between what Holt (1998) terms as 'critical reception' and 'referential reception'. It would be erroneous to argue that the UM respondents adopt critical reception while those from Unitar take on the latter. According to Holt (1998), critical reception is embodied by individuals with high levels of cultural capital. He asserts that these individuals "[Apply] a formal interpretive lens [and] read popular entertainment as entertaining fictions that are potentially edifying but that do not reflect directly the empirical world" (Holt 1998:9). They treat the media content as a form of cultural capital and socially distance themselves from those perceived as lacking the cultural competencies required in the interpretation of these media. On the other hand, referential reception is a term used to describe individuals with low levels of cultural capital. This group of audience tends to interpret cultural texts based on their personal experience and resists any critical judgement of the texts.

My data has shown that the distinction in cultural capital between the filmic reception of students from UM and those from Unitar is not as clear-cut as Holt suggests. In fact, the respondents from UM contest Holt's notion of critical reception in several ways. Although their interpretation of the films may reflect engagement with critical discourse, they also articulate their preference or dislike for certain aspects of the films in subjective terms and in ways that relate to their everyday lived experience. Furthermore, even though they may embody elitist subjectivities due to their public university status, they are far from socially distancing themselves from those deemed as lacking in cultural competencies. Their desire to see films like '*Gadoh*' engage the public in insights that are alternative to mainstream perspectives

evinces their collective hope for a better society. Likewise, it would be too reductive to identify those undergraduates from Unitar as having a low level of cultural capital. Even though they may not be exposed to the kind of politicised environment experienced by students from UM, they are equally critical of the films discussed and use them to articulate societal concerns. Hence, Holt's dichotomous notion of critical and referential receptions is irrelevant in this regard.

In the context of cultural class analysis, I argue that this blurry distinction between the two categories of receptions can be explained by the broader social context in which inter-ethnic relations have become more important than before. The role of social context in the meaning-making process of cultural texts should not be underestimated. Different scholars have defined social contexts in various ways. In her study on the interpretation of culturally diverse college students of American 'hood' films of the early 1990s, which portray young black males living in urban ghettos, Fisher (2006) defines social context in terms of the immediate environment in which meanings are constructed. She explores how the students' group dynamics and interpersonal relations with one another play a major role in the meanings they give to filmic texts. My research is an extension of hers in that it seeks to link these inter-group relations with the wider socio-political processes that constitute the students' everyday lived experience.

When taking social context into account, I realised that despite airing analytical views towards inter-ethnic relations portrayed in '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*', there are times when the comments made by middle-class respondents from both institutions simultaneously embody or reinforce the very ethnic divisions they are critiquing. An analysis of their narratives reveals that their social class background once again has a huge influence on their filmic attitudes. This is illustrated in the views expressed by a Chinese student from UM, Hui Wen, and two students from Unitar, Raju, an Indian and Raihan, a Malay, whom I cited below respectively.

> '*Gadoh*' is a good film because it aims to break racial stereotypes. In the film, there is a series of close-up scenes that ask for the views of students why they hate people from other races. The Chinese students say they don't like the Malays because even though they are

> lazy and not smart, they can still enter university. I feel that even though people say Malays are lazy, not all of them are like that. But when you look at the poor quality of work of the Malay students from UM, you will realise that what the students say in '*Gadoh*' is true. The Malays take it for granted when they enter a prestigious uni like UM. Unlike them, we Chinese have to work extra hard because not all of us come from rich families.
>
> In '*Sepet*', we know that Orked is rich because she can afford to have a maid. Not many Malaysians can afford a maid unless you are really rich. Usually, it's the families of *Dato* who employ maids. Orked represents the Malays who are better off than other races, which is exactly why Indians and Chinese are unhappy with them. Many people think that Indian students who go to private universities are rich. That's not true. Most of us can enter this school because we all borrow loans from different agencies to pay for our tuition fees. Like, for me, I didn't get any scholarship, so I have to work part-time.
>
> Films like '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*' are good because they aim to unite all races, but I don't agree that Malays are richer than Chinese like what both films show. Even though I'm Malay, I still have to borrow money from PTPTN[9]. Other Malay friends from Unitar pay for their tuition fees using scholarship from Karangkraf[10], not parents' money.

For all the positive reviews about '*Gadoh*' as quoted above, the responses reiterate the narratives of ethnic division rather than of inclusion. Hui Wen's remark about her educational experience in UM affirms the lazy Malay stereotype articulated by the

[9] Abbreviation for '*Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional*', or National Higher Education Fund, a government body responsible for issuing student loans to students pursuing tertiary education in Malaysia.

[10] An education fund established by Karangkraf Media Group to assist needy students in pursuing higher education in private universities.

Chinese student in '*Gadoh*', which contradicts the reason she is attracted to the film in the first place. On the other hand, Raju's comment about his own financial situation endorses his critique of the privileged position of the Malays. Likewise, Raihan's economic position justifies his critique of the representation of rich Malays in both films. The ways in which respondents from both UM and Unitar reify the ethnic divisions in the country in their narratives despite their embracement of ethnic unity can be explained by their economic capital. Despite owning high cultural capital in their interpretations of the films, their underprivileged economic position hinders them from engaging with discourses that extend beyond associations with ethnic exclusivity. Hui Wen's comment that not all Chinese come from rich families provides an alternative discourse of the common societal perceptions that all Chinese are economically well off. Similarly, Raju and Raihan offer alternative accounts of the financial position of students enrolled in private institutions. Thus, treating the students' narratives as resources for uncovering their lived experiences has enriched our understanding of why respondents from the middle-class category of all races would often articulate their views based on prevailing ethnicised categories.

5.4 Inter-Ethnic Romance

In this sub-section, I explore whether or not the respondents' socio-economic backgrounds would inform their interpretation of inter-ethnic romance in the films. As alluded to in Chapter 4, there is a lingering mistrust among some Malays towards non-Malays who convert to Islam in Malaysia. Non-Malays, especially Chinese who embrace Islam, are often questioned for their motives for conversion. Unlike other Muslims who are non-Malays ethnically, such as Indians and Arabs, inclusiveness into the Muslim fraternity is not extended to Chinese Muslims. Some Malays suspect that the latter's conversion is motivated by the desire to benefit from the Bumiputera incentives, such as to obtain land titles, entitlement to charity payments and licenses to run businesses designated for Muslims only (Ma 2011). As such, to test the validity of this assumption, I examined whether or not class factor would inform the undergraduates' responses towards inter-ethnic marriages. I was also interested in exploring if those from the high-income groups who have had numerous multi-ethnic encounters, as indicated by their participation in international study abroad

programmes or enrolment in international schools before entering university, are more open towards inter-ethnic marriage.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, their interpretations of inter-ethnic romance are largely connected to their religious affiliations. Findings for this chapter affirms the huge influence of religion more than any other social determinants by showing that their articulation of inter-ethnic romance did not fall neatly along class lines. The relation between the respondents' socio-economic backgrounds and their attraction to the inter-ethnic romance in '*Sepet*' or degree of willingness to convert to another religion for marriage is not clear-cut. As shown in Table 5.4 and 5.5 respectively, below, the results are widely distributed along the likert scale.

Table 5.4: Attitudes Towards Inter-Ethnic Romance in '*Sepet*'

Attitude/ Ethnicity	M	M	M	C	C	C	I	I	I	N	N	N	Total
Class	**High**	**Middle**	**Working**	**High**	**Middle**	**Working**	**High**	**Middle**	**Working**	**High**	**Middle**	**Working**	**-**
Like it very much	2	4	3	0	6	3	1	0	1	3	2	1	26
Like	6	21	1	5	8	1	1	5	6	3	2	1	60
Neutral	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	10
Dislike	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dislike it very much	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**9**	**26**	**5**	**6**	**17**	**5**	**3**	**5**	**8**	**6**	**4**	**2**	**96 (100%)**

Table 5.5: Attitudes Towards Religious Conversion for Marriage

Attitude/ Ethnicity	M	M	M	C	C	C	I	I	I	N	N	N	Total
Class	**High**	**Middle**	**Working**	**High**	**Middle**	**Working**	**High**	**Middle**	**Working**	**High**	**Middle**	**Working**	**-**
Willing to convert to Islam out of	N.A	N.A	N.A	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	2	1	9

marriage													
Not willing to convert to Islam out of marriage	N.A	N.A	N.A	2	10	3	2	3	6	4	1	**0**	31
Neutral	N.A	N.A	N.A	2	3	1	1	3	1	1	0	1	13
Total	**9**	**26**	**5**	**6**	**14**	**5**	**3**	**6**	**8**	**6**	**3**	**2**	**96**
Willing to convert to a religion other than Islam out of marriage	0	0	0	2	5	1	1	1	2	3	2	1	18
Not willing to convert to a religion other than Islam out of marriage	9	26	5	3	6	3	1	5	6	1	0	1	66
Neutral	0	0	0	1	3	1	1	0	0	2	1	0	9
Total	**9**	**26**	**5**	**6**	**14**	**5**	**3**	**6**	**8**	**6**	**3**	**2**	**96**

However, the lack of class disparity in the interpretation of this theme does not necessarily mean that class is not an influential factor in making sense of the respondents' attitudes. In fact, it reveals subtle messages about how class is interwoven with ethnicity in the everyday lives of the respondents. As the findings below will demonstrate, those ethnic minorities who deny that access to Bumiputera privileges influence their attraction to inter-ethnic relationships come from all class categories. This is an indication of their collective desire as ethnic minorities to dissociate themselves from the stigma of being marginalised groups in society. The remarks made by a working-class Chinese student, Zhen Long demonstrates this. Zhen Long is one of the Buddhist students who had expressed willingness to convert to

Islam out of marriage. When asked how important does he view access to Bumiputera incentives as a motivation to convert, he mentioned:

> No, no. Not at all. If I want to convert, it is out of love for the girl. Not because I want all the things that they (the Malays) are getting. If I want what they are getting, I will work hard for it. Converting (to Islam) is not the solution. I will prove that I can also get rewards through hard work.

A Christian student from Sarawak of Iban Bidayuh ethnicity who comes from a high-income household, Mike, concurs with Zhen Long:

> I don't see it that way. In fact, marrying a Malay doesn't automatically guarantee me the privilege. You see, even though I'm called Bumiputera, it's in the name only. I don't get what the Malays are getting. I can't apply to UiTM because they only take in Malay students. My IC (Identification Card) may change my religion to Islam, but when people see my face, they know I'm not Malay. So to answer your question, I will tell you that we people from Sabah and Sarawak don't need to be with Malays in order to live the life of Malays.

Zhen Long and Mike's refusal to identify themselves with the erroneous assumption that non-Malays who embrace Islam out of marriage for the purpose of access to privilege once again underscores the defensiveness of the ethnic minorities from the high and working income groups in protecting the dignity of their ethnic communities. This is evident through statements like "… I can also get rewards through hard work" and "… we people from Sabah and Sarawak don't need to be with Malays in order to live the life of Malays."

Among the Malay students, aversion towards inter-ethnic marriage is exhibited irrespective of class positions as well. When asked whether or not they would be comfortable marrying a non-Muslim who is willing to convert to Islam, only 21 out of 40 or 52.5% of them expressed reluctance in doing so even though the onus would arguably be greater for the non-Muslim partner. Commonly cited reasons point to the

deep entrenchment of ethnicised boundaries between the different ethnicities. In response to the films '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*', '*Talentime*' and '*Sepet*', all of which centre on inter-ethnic romance, a Malay respondent from a middle-class background, Bella, explained her position:

> He will have his own customs, traditions and practices that are different from ours. Yes, he may be willing to convert to Islam but I'm sure I'll have to make some compromises as well after marrying him. Besides, my father is also not open to having a non-Muslim in the family. That is probably why inter-ethnic romantic films like '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*', '*Talentime*' and '*Sepet*' have inconclusive ending. It is to show the impossibility of cross-racial marriages in Malaysia.

Another Malay student from a working-class background, Ashraf, articulates his views as follows when interpreting 'Talentime':

> Mixed-race marriage is possible in Malaysia, but it is very rare. Personally, I am hesitant of dating someone who is of a different race. I may not be able to adapt to their culture. Which is why I feel that 'Talentime' is not representative of Malaysian society. To come across a family from a mixed-race marriage, like Malay and Chinese, or Malay and Indian is already so rare in Malaysia, what more a Malay family with mixed British background that speaks with an English accent like Melur's (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3: Melur (second from left) is seen having dinner with her family, including her British grandmother and father, and Malay mother.

Bella and Ashraf did not mention anything about the characters' class differences in their engagement with the films. For example, they did not highlight the class disparity between Melur, who lives in a big house and owns a domestic helper, and her Indian boyfriend Mahesh who comes from a poor family that lives in a ramshackle house. Had they done so, it would have underscored the multiple challenges of inter-ethnic couples that do not just have to overcome differences along the lines of ethnicity, but class as well. Nonetheless, their point that the films are not illustrative of Malaysian society reiterates research that shows that inter-ethnic marriages are more common in the Borneo states than in West Malaysia. Official statistics on the number of registered international marriages yearly are not available, but where international marriages are concerned, media reports have proven that international marriages in Malaysia usually involve unions between local men and foreign brides from neighbouring Asian countries, especially Vietnam and China (Chee 2011). Although there has been a report regarding the rise of marriages between local women and British men between 2001 and 2005, the increase is insignificant and only concerns non-Muslim marriages (Chee 2011). This affirms Bella and Ashraf's point that most inter-ethnic films are not representative of Malaysian society.

The sentiments of Bella and Ashraf are also shared by those nine Malays from high-income backgrounds. Out of these nine Malays, six of them have studied in

international schools and participated in study abroad programmes before. When asked whether they are receptive of marrying non-Muslims who will convert to Islam, only two out of these nine students are open to do so, proving that social class and exposure to cultural diversity do not necessarily inform one's choice of life partner. The other seven students gave the same reasons as those from other class backgrounds as to why they have qualms about having a non-Muslim spouse.

In the course of my interviews, I came across a Malay couple from Group C who made an interesting pair because the girl comes from a high income family, was educated in an international school, and speaks English with a strong American accent whereas the boy comes from a low income family, is educated in a Malay-dominated national school, and speaks Malay throughout the entire interview. Below is the excerpt of my interview with Hanis, the Malay girl, and Fido, the Malay boy when sharing their views on the relationship between Jason and Orked in '*Sepet*' after the film screening session:

> Me: Hanis, could you share with me about your experience when studying in an international school?
>
> Hanis: When I was younger, my family had to move twice to follow my dad. He got a job abroad. I was enrolled in an international school in Bangkok. There were all sorts of students- the 'blondies', the 'butches', mostly Americans, though there were also students from Belgium and India.
>
> Me: Does that mean you have many friends from multi-ethnic backgrounds?
>
> Hanis: Oh yeah. I was close to a handful few. Yeah.
>
> Me: Were you ever dating any of your schoolmates at any point of time?
>
> Hanis: No. Although I know many of them were dating. Their culture is different. Their dating culture is also different. There's this thing about my

family. Even though we've moved to a different country, my dad would ensure that we stay rooted to our Malay roots. Sometimes it's tough to keep your identity. It's really, really challenging but we managed somehow.

Me: What about you, Fido? What makes you attracted to Hanis even though language seems to be a barrier between the two of you?

Fido: Haha. That's true. My English *terok* (is horrendous). But Hanis and I do communicate in Malay, but her Malay is *terok* like my English. Haha. I'm attracted to her because she is caring and wears the *tudung* (headscarf). I like girls who wear *tudung*. They look cute in them.

Me: How would you compare your relationship with that between Jason and Orked in '*Sepet*'?

Hanis: Jason and Orked don't seem to bother about their race. But for me and Fido, we prefer to be with people from the same race as us. It's easier.

Me: In what way is it easier?

Hanis: Same culture, same religion.

Fido: In Malaysia, there are so many Malay girls, so why bother looking for girls from other races? Hah!

Both Hanis and Fido's comments reflect the high degree of ethnic entrenchment in the minds of Malaysian youth. Even though embracement of inter-ethnic difference is evident in the public sphere, this attitude does not extend to the private sphere, as exemplified by their stance towards inter-ethnic marriage. Hanis, who has extensive exposure to multicultural diversity, would rather overcome differences in social status and language dynamics with a person from the same ethnic background than being in a cross-ethnic relationship. Likewise, Fido's attraction to Hanis inscribes ethnic-conscious markers, as evident from his confession that goes: "I like girls who wear

tudung". His comment regarding the abundance of Malay girls in Malaysia also implies his subscription to the normative understanding that people should only date others of the same ethnicity. Thus, all the above excerpts prove that the seeming absence of class differences in the audience interpretation of inter-ethnic relationship does not mean that class background does not shed any light on ethnic dynamics. Rather, it shows that respondents of all class categories share a common attitude of indifference towards inter-ethnic romance.

The entrenchment of ethnic difference in the minds of the respondents is also highlighted in my analysis of how '*Sepet*' mobilises a set of discourses around the unequal life opportunities between Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras. Beyond the obvious theme of inter-ethnic romance, the class differences between Orked and Jason also emerges as another subject matter of the film, as discussed earlier. Yet, only one respondent noticed this entwinement and invoked class differences between the two protagonists in her response. Evincing the most critical view of the film, this respondent was the most attentive to the subtle reference to Bumiputera privileges in the conversation between Yam and Orked's mother even though it was just a passing comment. The rest were entirely and genuinely unaware of the complexities other than ethnicity that surround Orked and Jason's relationship. Although in her interview with academic Tilman Baumgartel in 2012, Yasmin Ahmad vehemently asserted that '*Sepet*' is not a film about ethnicity and encouraged a reading of the film from a humanist perspective instead (Baumgartel 2012), the fact that the major recurring motifs and images in the film involve characters from two different ethnicities may explain why the respondents had watched it purely from an ethnicised lens.

Yet, although '*Sepet*' is meant to disrupt ethnicised boundaries (Khoo 2009a; McKay 2012), there are certain aspects of the film that seem to reinforce rather than dismantle ethnic stereotypes. For instance, Jason's character lives up to the stereotypical Chinese hooligan from working class background- he has spiky dyed hair, borrows money from loan sharks and lives a promiscuous lifestyle. These stereotypes are reiterated in the penultimate scene where Orked breaks down in her car while on her way to the airport after reading Jason's letter. While her mother tries to console her, her father expresses his disapproval of their relationship. As he reprimands Orked, "I don't fancy you going out with this guy who is involved in gangsterism, making a girl pregnant,

whatever… I truly believe that this guy is not suitable for you. I'm sorry." Even though nothing is mentioned about ethnicity, highlighting Jason's delinquent lifestyle tacitly reaffirms the stereotypical image of the working-class Chinese hooligan. The fact that these references are made so subtly may explain why the respondents have overlooked issues other than inter-ethnic romance raised in the film. Many of them interpreted the relationship between Orked and Jason largely based on their socialisation experience and everyday encounters. They were less critical on the class dynamics of the couple and found gratification in the narrative instead. The comments expressed by Iswarya, a Hindu from a middle-class background, exemplifies this:

> Iswarya: '*Sepet*' is a sweet movie. Besides all the sweet things that Jason does for Orked, like going around town to look for tuber roses, Jason and Orked overcome their ethnic difference in order to be together.
>
> Me: Apart from ethnic difference, are there any other challenges that they have to overcome?
>
> Iswarya: Hmm… religion? Being able to ignore race and religion in their relationship shows that love conquers all. Some of my friends are also involved in this kind of relationship. But they don't have the intention to get married. So far, I don't see any problems among people I know who get married to another race. They are living happily. I have an uncle who got married to a Malay woman. Two years ago, when my grandmother passed away during Deepavali, we had our prayer stuff. She (uncle's wife) came for the prayer. She even did her part in the prayer. When I looked at her, you know, she is Malay but she doesn't like, you know, I'm Malay, I can't do this. She respects us. It's not that I discriminate against Malays but you know, being Malay, you know Malay, I can't do this, I can't do that. This is not allowed. But when my relative got married to an Indian, she respects both religions.

Iswarya's genuine enjoyment of '*Sepet*' and her reading of it as an endorsement of inter-ethnic romance is clear in this extract. Her attitudes and beliefs towards such

romance is evident through her statement, "love conquers all". However, at no point in the interview did Iswarya allude to Jason's working class background and how it may serve as a hindrance to their relationship. Instead, what was invoked was purely Jason's ethnic identity, suggesting that ethnic difference matters more than any other forms of social disparity. It should be noted that Iswarya's firm assertion of ethnicity as the key defining aspect of the characters' relationship, though not reflective of all the positions taken up with respect to '*Sepet*', are representative of a primary strand of audience reception. The interviewees' consciousness of ethnicity, more than the intersections of ethnicity with social class, emerge as factors inflecting the depth and scope of my respondents' attitudes to those films that attempt to raise issues of double marginalisation. Although the students' responses reflect a deep entrenchment of ethnicity in their mindsets, the failure to recognise how Jason's class background is intertwined with his ethnicity eliminates any understanding of the multiple challenges and barriers that ethnic minorities from working class backgrounds have to overcome in order to form a relationship with a Malay person from a higher social class.

The respondents' inability to identify how ethnicity is entwined with class is largely attributed to the way in which local films, be it mainstream or independent ones, often privilege middle-class characters, values and assumptions about the social world. This is because they are mostly made and consumed by members of the middle-class, which is the hegemonic culture in Malaysia. Even films that attempt to problematise ethnic privilege, such as '*Sepet*', assume the position of the middle class. Working-class characters are seldom featured as heroes in local films. On-screen portrayals of working-class ethnic minorities as heroes are even rare. Even when working-class characters emerge as heroes, they are either denied a happy ending at the end of the film, as exemplified by Jason in 'Sepet' and Budi in '29 *Febuari*', or their fate remains ambiguous and is left to the audience's interpretation, as illustrated by Mahesh in 'Talentime' and Rashid in '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*'. When the hero does achieve a happy ending, like Farid in '*Estet*', it is featured in the genre of romantic comedy. The romanticisation of his love story with the Indian woman through scenes of them dancing and singing supersedes his everyday lived experience as a plantation worker, and makes it all too easy for the audience to overlook his harsh working conditions.

The double standard in how Malaysian films depict the different social classes has resulted in simplistic representations of the working class. The depiction of the working class as a troubled and problematic group often reflects the culture-of-poverty theory in sociology. This view holds that the working class are poor not because of the broader structural inequalities in society or because they lack access to stable employment opportunities. Rather, they have the wrong values and attitudes towards work and school, which makes them impoverished. In contrast to what is considered the normative cultural values of the middle-class, which include the belief that success in attributed to individual effort, the thesis blames the working class for their failure to adopt middle-class values and to fully integrate into the dominant Malaysian culture.

This culture-of-poverty framework has unfortunately entered popular imagination. While there are some Malaysian-made films that acknowledge that the working-class face the challenges of poverty and ethnic discrimination, they continue to blame individual attitudes of the poor as the primary obstacle to their success and upward mobility. '*Sepet*' is one example of a film that slips into this tendency through its strereotypical image of Jason. Had the film not portrayed its hero in such a simplified manner, then Yasmin's attempt to highlight structural flaws as the cause of working-class underachievement rather than their individual shortcomings would have emerged more strongly.

In view of this, I argue that the film '*Gadoh*' sheds better light on the structural causes of ethnic inequality than '*Sepet*' does. The final scene represents this best. In this scene, a *Dato*', who is an Education Minister, has been invited to grace off the school's theatre performance, which is meant to showcase how students of the school, known for being notorious, have managed to set aside their ethnic differences and come together in putting up the performance. The Minister is seen leaving the theatre hastily during the curtain call. When the school principal tries to stop him from leaving, he expresses his disbelief at the students' criticisms towards the authorities during the performance. No statement is as cynical as how one student expresses it in a monologue: "The teachers tell me that I am stupid and lazy. I go to school to learn, but the teachers are only interested in boosting the school's ranking. They are more concerned about making the school number one. But number one for whom? For them, or for us?" Such criticisms incur the wrath of the Education Minister, who then

laments to the principal, "How can you allow those students to make a fool out of us all?" The final scene is therefore salient in highlighting that the solution to the ethnic tension in public schools requires a sustained political commitment from all members of society especially the government and school authorities, and not merely the individual moral conversion of problematic students.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the intersections of social class and ethnic backgrounds reflect the depth and scope of the undergraduates' attitudes to those Malaysian-made films that raise issues of class and ethnic consciousness. I have shown that what matters most are not ethnicity or class per se. Rather, it is the ways in which these two social dimensions have given rise to paradoxes that arise from the intersections.

Respondents of high income and working class backgrounds adopt an ambivalent attitude that challenge ethnic hierarchies in Malaysia but in so doing, slipped into the tendency of reiterating ethnic boundaries. Structures of ethnicisation in the country have discouraged non-Malays from the lower income groups from broaching Islam and Malay hegemony in the interviews in spite of their marginalised status. Likewise, ethnic minorities from the upper class background made a conscious effort to deny the ethnicised discourse and negative stereotypes attached to their ethnic counterparts from the working class category in their quest for respectability by other ethnic groups. By obfuscating the reality that social inequalities and inter-ethnic tensions exist, the institutionalisation of Bumiputera privilege and ethnic hierarchies remains unchallenged. Additionally, the desire of these elites to escape the stigma attached to poor ethnic minorities within the political economy of Malaysian nationalism fuels not only inter-ethnic difference, but also intra-ethnic class hierarchies, the existence of which have been acknowledged by the Malay and non-Malay Bumiputera respondents from the working class background.

The denial of social inequalities in Malaysia thus leaves us with an ideological problem. It creates a world that forces ethnic minorities to accept a value system in which they are the inevitable losers. It devalues those from the working class, for

whom a high-income lifestyle is quite unattainable, and sustains the widespread assumption that a positive image of a minority ethnic group is necessarily of an upper middle class. This generates contradictory attitudes: first, it gives the impression that working class minority can achieve upward social mobility in a predominantly Malay country as long as they work hard enough when in most accounts, this is impossible. Second, it creates the illusion that economic success is as achievable for ethnic minorities as for the majority. This coerces ethnic minorities to accept the system that handicaps them without being able to improve their living conditions.

Although both the Malay and non-Malay middle class have expressed criticisms towards the management of ethnic policies and relations in the country, they are either articulated in the self-interest of their own ethnic communities or in a way that reinscribes the ethnic divisions in the country. These attitudes are shaped by the broader circumstances in which they find themselves. In this regard, I find Cornel West's approach to the life chances affecting the blacks in America applicable to the Malaysian context. In arguing that ethnicity still matters despite the rhetoric of colour-blindness, West (1993) posits that structural constraints and behavioural impediments on black upward mobility are inseparable. Social institutions and values should not be conceptualised as dichotomous. Likewise, by recognising that the cultural values of society are rooted in such institutions as schools and the family, and that economic and political institutions in turn promote particular cultural ideals of life, we are able to enrich our understanding of why the Malaysian youth think the way they do.

CHAPTER 6

Malaysian Female Undergraduates' Interpretations of Inter-Ethnic Themes in Local Films

6.1 Introduction

The national discourse of modernity in Malaysia is largely intertwined with the state's agenda to strengthen the political and economic power of the predominantly male Malay nationalist leaders (Hanita 2015). Attempts to strengthen Malay hegemony usually occur in tandem with the institutionalisation of Islam and the enforcement of Islamic morality that regulate the behaviour of Malaysians. These regulations have not only affected the Muslims in the country, but the non-Muslims as well. Works that have examined the impacts of the state's modernity project largely show that it is women who often end up bearing the brunt of ethno-religious policies constructed by the male elites (Ong 1995; Khoo 2006; Joseph 2014). The state rhetoric on Islamisation has perpetuated patriarchal values and ideologies that reinforce male

supremacy at the expense of women's status, as exemplified by the relative ease for Muslim men to enter a polygamous marriage (Ong 1990; Maznah 2014; Olivier 2016). State anxieties of modernity are often manifested and debated in the realm of popular culture, including in portrayals of Malay-Muslim womanhood in films.

In view of how state anxieties have impacted Malaysian women more than men, and given the limited space that this dissertation offers, this chapter will only focus on the narratives of the female respondents. It will interrogate the ways in which Malaysian female undergraduates negotiate these tensions in their interpretations of inter-ethnic relations and romance featured in Malaysian films. Adopting an intersectional framework, it explores how if at all, do religious, ethnicised and gendered concerns and subjectivities come into play in their narratives. It then evaluates how these might enrich our understanding of the ways in which they negotiate the structural impacts of state-sponsored Islamisation on their lived multi-ethnic experience.

This chapter aims to make two important contributions to the extant literature. At the theoretical level, it aims to examine how religious ideologies and subjectivities can be used to maintain, contest and/or reinforce gendered and ethnicised meanings about inter-ethnic relations. Although feminist works on intersectionality and religious women's agency have gained huge scholarly attention, these two areas of study are seldom examined together (Singh 2015). The chapter refers to religious women as those who subscribe to a particular religious tradition, which revolve around organised institutions that provide a set of norms that regulate behaviour. By religious women's agency, I adopt Burke's (2012) notion of compliant agency exhibited by religious women, which refers to how they inhabit or embody religious norms for reasons internal to the religious practice. In the context of multi-religious countries like Malaysia where as much as 98.9 per cent of its citizen population profess a religious faith based on the 2010 Census (Saw 2015), and where religion is strongly identified with ethnicity, an inquiry into how religious women's subjectivities may illuminate their inter-ethnic experience at the everyday level is all the more important. This approach is also relevant for my inquiry since 43 out of 45 of my female respondents subscribe to a particular religion. I provide a breakdown of the religious backgrounds of the different ethnicities in Table 6.1 below. Out of the 45 respondents,

19 of them are Muslims, including 17 Malays and 2 Indians. 8 of them are Hindus, 7 are Buddhists, 9 are Christians and 2 others are Taoists.

Table 6.1: Profile of Female Respondents Based On their Ethnic Identities and Religious Affiliations

Ethnicity/ Religion	Muslims	Hindus	Buddhists	Christians	Other Religions	TOTAL
Malays	17	-	-	-	-	17
Chinese	-	-	6	5	1	12
Indians	2	8	-	-	-	10
Non-Malay Bumiputeras	-	-	1	4	1	6
TOTAL	19	8	7	9	2	45

At the empirical level, the chapter shows how this objective can be achieved by extending the inquiry through examining religious women's relationships with men and women of other ethnicities. Current literature on audience reception in Malaysia has been limited to how Malay women negotiate state tensions of modernity over their ethnic and gender identities in their consumption of local media (Pam Nilan 2012; Dahlia 2014; Daniels 2013; Md Azalanshah and Runnel 2014). These studies have largely analysed meaning making as an individual psychological process that uncovers how women engage with different media in relation to their personal experience. They did not highlight how meaning-making can be a dynamic social process of women's negotiation with others from culturally diverse backgrounds. I argue that an examination of how meanings are constructed in dialogue with others is even more salient when discussion of themes that reflect the intersections of ethnicity and gender are concerned. Thus, by including the narratives of non-Malay women, and how women interact with others of different ethnic and gender backgrounds, this research hopes to provide a more comprehensive account of the influence of female subjectivities on their multi-ethnic relations.

The chapter will go on to explain how the respondents interpret themes on inter-ethnic relations (Section 6.2) and inter-ethnic romance (Section 6.3). Through inductive coding of the interview excerpts, the findings show that negotiations of the structural context brought about by Islamisation generate collective meanings that are embodied

by the interplay between the women's gendered, ethnicised as well as religious subjectivities. In theorising the broader implications of how religious women's agency may illuminate or challenge intersectional frameworks (Section 6.4), the chapter argues that by examining how Malaysian women articulate and appropriate their religious beliefs at the intersections of socially-constructed categories of difference, notably ethnicity and gender, researchers are able to uncover taken-for-granted narratives that reflect what religion means in the Malaysian context. In the context of this research, this means that while religion is a source of patriarchal oppression and ethnic hegemony among the elites, it is an instrument of progressive gender politics and inter-culturalism for the female respondents.

6.2 Inter-Ethnic Relations

6.2.1 Intersections of Ethnicity, Class and Gender in Films: Malay Women Encounters with the Male 'Other'

The dominant ethnic ideological paradigm in Malaysia is one that defines Malayness against Chineseness (Tong 2006). The riots in 1969 that was largely brought about by the tensions between the Malays and Chinese are often cited as the main cause of the historically fragile relations between these two ethnic groups (Frith 2000; Azza 2016). Given the salience of Malay-Chinese relations in Malaysia, this section focuses on the relationship between Malay women and their non-Malay counterparts. While this sub-section examines how films represent these relationships on the screen, the next sub-section analyses how the Malay female respondents negotiate their ethnic and gender identities in relation to non-Malay men. The way in which Malay women discuss their relationship with non-Malay men would shed light on how they negotiate the state's discourse on Islamic morality, which enforces regulations like female subservience to patriarchy, and gender segregation to prevent physical intimacy between males and females.

The discourse on Islamic morality has been used by ethnic chauvinists to criticise Yasmin's films. In a television forum in which Yasmin's '*Sepet*' and '*Gubra*' were discussed, Akmal Abdullah, an invited guest from the Malay-language newspaper *Berita Harian* had expressed his distaste of seeing Orked, with her strong religious

background, to fall in love with the "Chinese criminal" Jason (Khoo 2009a:108). Film critic Hassan Muthalib articulates Akmal's racist view in terms of how the '*maruah*' or honour of Malay men is threatened when Malay women are attracted to Chinese men (Khoo 2009). Conversely, mainstream films and drama serials that depict physical intimacy between Muslim characters do not invite as much controversies as those that feature romance involving characters of different ethnic backgrounds. In fact, these mainstream productions have garnered huge support from the Malay-majority audience judging from box office sales and awards that they have won.

Indeed, in both '*Sepet*' and '*Gubra*', the Chinese men are positioned in a much more positive light than the Malay men. Unlike Johari who tries to get physically intimate with Orked at their friend's birthday party, Jason is featured as a well-mannered boy who does not take advantage of her, thereby debunking the stereotype that illegal video disc Chinese sellers like Jason are necessarily uncouth. Likewise, in '*Gubra*', Orked is drawn to Alan after she discovers that Arif has cheated on her. The Malay men's honour are at an even greater stake considering that Orked is able to relate better with Jason and Alan who are from working-class backgrounds than with Johari and Arif who are both from the upper-middle class families. Attraction to the less privileged hero is not only limited to Chinese men. In 'Talentime', Melur also develops a romantic relationship with an Indian man, Mahesh despite the latter being hearing-impaired and coming from a much poorer background. One can argue that this problematisation of class differences is what differentiates Yasmin's films from other mainstream films that showcase the relationships between Malay women and non-Malay men. For example, in '*Sembilu* 2005', a film by a renowned mainstream production company Skop Production, ethnic difference is the only barrier that the characters Salina (Hetty Sarlene) and Vince (Vince Chong) have to overcome, as both of them come from a well-to-do family.

Furthermore, the Chinese men in '*Sepet*' are also featured as more ethnically tolerant than the Malay men. Jason's friend, Keong refuses to subscribe to ethnic stereotypes when he tells Orked that, "not all Malays are lazy." Keong also agrees to have Jason introduce Orked to him despite knowing that she is of a different ethnicity. In fact, it is Keong who encourages Jason to meet Orked at the airport before she leaves for the UK after learning that the couple has stopped seeing each other. Keong's liberalism

stands in stark contrast to Izwan's bigoted views of the Chinese. Izwan is the man who Orked's best friend is dating. Upon discovering that Orked is dating a Chinese man, Izwan hurls racist remarks at Orked by referring to Jason as '*sepet*' and '*Char Kuay Teow*', a popular Chinese dish, which are common markers of Chineseness that racists Malays often use to set themselves apart from the ethnic Chinese.

Yasmin's films also portray the positive friendship between the Malay heroine and the non-Malay hero. For example, in '*Muallaf*', Rohani maintains a cordial relationship with Brian, a local Chinese, and Brother Anthony, a local Indian, both of whom are of the Christian faith. Like Orked, Rohani exemplifies an image of the Malay-Muslim woman who is able to engage positively with fellow Malaysians from other ethnicities. The two sisters become Brian's source of comfort as he discovers similarities between the sisters' traumatic childhood and his. Despite hailing from a different religious background, Rohani is able to act as Brian's confidante, offering him enough emotional support to improve his relationship with his mother. As stated in Chapter Four, she even encourages him to visit her in Penang and take her to church on Sunday. The next section aims to analyse if the female respondents' relations with their male counterparts would resemble those between the female protagonists' and the non-Malay male characters.

6.2.2 Respondents' Interpretations of Inter-Ethnic Relations between Malay Women and Non-Malay Men in Films

In my interviews, I asked all the respondents how they perceive representations of non-Malay characters in the films, their views of the characters' relationships with Malays, their personal encounters with Chinese men, and whether or not they are involved in similar relationships. Of all the films in the filmography, only 'Spinning *Gasing*', '*Sembilu 2005*' and Yasmin Ahmad's films feature the relationship between Malay women and Chinese men. Since only a negligible 4% of respondents have watched 'Spinning *Gasing*', and '*Sembilu* 2005' is not accessible given the dated nature of the film, only Yasmin's films were discussed. The data demonstrates that none of the Malay respondents shares the popular public sentiment that perceives Chinese heroes in films as a threat to Malay hypermasculinity. Even the Malay men did not think of Jason in '*Sepet*' and Alan in '*Gubra*' as heroes, problematic. Instead,

they adopted an oppositional stance against mainstream media when articulating their views towards Chinese representations on the wide screen. To quote one of the Malay male respondents, Redza:

> It's very, very rare for Malaysian movie to have Chinese acting as heroes. One thing I like about Yasmin's films is that they always show something different. I really appreciate those filmmakers like her who bother to experiment with something new. If you want to know, many production companies in Malaysia are too engrossed with making profits. They prioritise profit over stimulating the audience's critical thinking. You heard of MIG before? What's that guy's name (pause to think)… Hah! David Teo. You heard of David Teo? That's his company. That's an example of a company that produce films with a consideration for profits only!

'MIG' refers to Metrowealth International Group, a major mainstream film production company headed by David Teo, CEO of MIG who has produced over 100 films since the year 2000. Having watched some of the more recent horror films produced by MIG, such as '*Pengantin Malam'* ('Bride at Night') (dir. Eyra Rahman 2014), '*Nasi Tangas*' ('Poisoned Steamed Rice') (dir. Hashim Rejab 2014) and '*Sumpahan Kum Kum'* ('The Ghost's Curse') (dir. Ismail Hashim 2012), I would argue that the filmic narratives are repetitive and not stimulating. Besides, they continue to uphold patriarchal values and demean the position of women in society. These films would often feature the repressed return of the central female character as vengeful female ghosts or other supernatural beings. She is often a subject of male brutality, such as rape, murder and domestic abuse. In her reincarnation as a ghostly figure, she embodies what Creed (1993) terms as the 'abject feminine' when she wreaks havoc in society in her quest for revenge. The figure of the possessed woman who acts hysterically presupposes a notion of female vulnerability and lack of emotional restraint (Alicia 2015). In a nutshell, horror films featuring Malay women demonstrate how the female ghost resists the patriarchal order, which paradoxically, is restored at the end of the film through the religious exorcism that is often carried out by a male religious scholar.

Other than the repetition of common storylines, ethnic Chinese seldom become lead characters in mainstream films, telemovies or dramas unless they are Muslim converts. Within the Malaysian entertainment industry, the household names of Chinese Muslim actors that are often featured on screen are Adam Corrie, or going by his Muslim name, Adam Corrie Lee Abdullah, and Chew Kin Wah, or also known as Anuar Chew Abdullah. Kin Wah has even won the 'Best Male Actor Award' for his acting in the telemovie '*Matahari Terbit Lagi'* (The Sun Rises Again) at the 2014 Malaysian Screen Awards (Feride 2014). Malaysians often identify Chinese Muslim conversion to Islam as "*masuk Melayu*", which literally means "enter Malay" or "become Malay", thus reiterating the close entwinement between Islam and Malayness. As discussed in Chapter Four, Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia often feel pressured to learn and embrace slices of Malay culture and lifestyle in order to gain recognition by the Malay majority. Malaysian daily, *The Star* reported that Kin Wah himself acknowledges that part of the reason for his success in winning the award lies in his ability to converse in fluent Malay, a major shortcoming among other Chinese actors in Malaysia. On the contrary, the fact that Ng Choo Seong who acted as Jason, and Alan Yun who acted as Alan are not Muslims in real life speaks volume about the acceptance of my Malay viewers towards Chinese who are not Muslims. It shows that the educated section of Malaysian youth as represented by my respondents, are more disposed to look at cinematic representations of Chinese in a spirit of pluralism and integration.

In addition to how the respondents perceive representations of Chinese men, I also examined their comments on the relationships between the Malay women and Chinese men in the films. As highlighted in Chapters Four and Five, entering into an inter-ethnic romantic relationship is still considered a social taboo in Malaysia. Those Malay female respondents who have ever dated Chinese men in high schools before have stopped doing so due to parental objections. Their courtship did not work out due to the same reason. Nonetheless, this does not stop them from forging convivial friendships with Chinese men. All the Malay women I interviewed commented that Orked and Rohani's friendships with the Chinese men in the films resemble that of theirs with their Chinese male friends. All 17 Malay women did not view religion as a barrier to their interactions and relations with their male friends, including those of other ethnicities. In fact, they appropriate religious norms and teachings to bridge

ethnic differences. This is highlighted by the comments of Natalia and Syuhada, respectively, below:

> From '*Sepet*' and '*Gubra*', we can see that Orked is close to Jason and his brother. This is common in Malaysia. We have Chinese guy friends, Christian guy friends, we work with them for group assignments, presentations… it's common! We can be intimate also, but of course not to the extent of getting physically close. Some of our male friends are Christians, so they also know about maintaining gender boundaries to avoid intimacy. Our friendship is based on mutual respect. In '*Sepet*', we can see Jason and Orked touching each other (Figure 6.1). In '*Gubra*' also, Orked touch [sic] Alan's body outside the toilet, but we are not like that (Figure 6.2). In Islam, it is *haram* (forbidden) to touch someone who is not your *mahram* (legal spouse or immediate kin).

> In the film '*Muallaf*', Rohani told Brian to take his mum to church. I think the director shows this scene on purpose. Promoting multiculturalism has been a trademark of Yasmin's films… Other films show multiculturalism also but they are not real… To some people, this is like, wow! A Malay telling a Christian to go to church! But to me, this is no big deal. Everyday, we remind each other, our Malay and non-Malay friends to pray. Like, "Hey, go *sembahyang lah*!" (Go perform your prayer). Our Chinese friends will remind us to go and pray also when we hang out with them.

Figure 6.1: Orked affectionately helping Jason to remove a fallen eyelash in a scene from '*Sepet*'

Figure 6.2: Orked is seen removing a strand of hair from Alan's body in '*Gubra*'

The respondents' narratives, which mostly suggest positive cross-cultural encounters with the male 'other', stand in stark contrast to existing accounts that usually pit the Malays against the Chinese. In works that illuminate Malay-Chinese interactions, the relations between these two ethnicities are usually constructed in antagonistic terms. In most cases, Islam is often invoked to show how the Malays use their religion in their interaction with non-Malays as a means through which they assert their ethnic demands and privileges (Frith 2000; Wilford 2006). Nonetheless, these literatures often discuss multiculturalism from a top-down perspective that focuses on the macro level, that is, how broader political issues that involve ethnic-based privileges and cultural maintenance influence ethnic relations. None of these studies deals adequately with how cultural diversity is experienced in everyday lived reality.

On the other hand, my findings demonstrate how the respondents negotiate ethnic differences in the realm of everyday life through their interactions with members of other ethnic groups on a daily basis. Feminist scholars have emphasised the significance of gender relations in multicultural and multi-ethnic societies (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992). Despite the tendency of some scholars to associate gender inequalities with minority groups, others like Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) have

argued that women play an important role in society as they are perceived as the "primordial intergenerational transmitters of cultural traditions such as language and customs" (Weber 2015:159-160). This "burden of ethno-cultural continuity" (Yuval-Davis 1999:196) also manifests itself in the realm of everyday culture through the women's behavior and attire (Timmerman 2000). My Malay female respondents certainly embody these characteristics in their interactions with the male 'other'. Not only do they prevent religion from acting as a barrier to forge positive cross-cultural relations with non-Muslim males. They also appropriate it to bridge the ethnic gap between them and the latter. In so doing, they show how identity negotiation at the level of daily interaction can complicate identity constructions at the ideological level.

Thus, in analysing Malay relations with other ethnicities, it is important to adopt the approach of what Wise and Velayutham term as 'everyday multiculturalism'. This entails examining the daily practice and lived experience of diversity in specific contexts and spaces of encounter (Wise and Velayutham 2009). Yet, while the focus is on the micro aspect of everyday life, the everyday multiculturalism perspective does not ignore how wider socio-political structures and processes infiltrate the realm of everyday practice. Syuhada's comments that "promoting multiculturalism has been a trademark of Yasmin's films" and "other films show multiculturalism also but they are not real," indicate her awareness of the social engineering of ethnic harmony by the state through portrayals of enforced multiculturalism in mainstream films. Yet, by countering the grand narrative of multiculturalism represented by the deliberate enforcement of respect for religious differences, and suggesting that her encounter with other ethnicities on a daily basis is more genuine than that, points to the significance of examining how the macro and micro processes of multiculturalism interact with each other in a dialectical manner.

The narratives of these young Malay women also shed light on the importance of problematising the way in which notions of Malay femininity have been constructed around the state's discourse of modernity, which defines the modern Malay women as those who are global in outlook yet remain rooted in local, cultural values. Yet, academic scholarship has often conflated being modern with being multicultural, that is, "secular, progressive and liberal" (Khoo 2006:127). These characteristics are often constructed in ways that are synonymous with the embracement of multiculturalism,

as evident from statements like: "… the progressives who believe in multiculturalism, bilingualism and secularism…" (Khoo 2006:127) and "independent heroines [who] [transcend] cultural differences and promoting a peaceful, politically correct notion of a multiracial Malaysia" (Hanita 2015:82). However, such constructions are often made in contradistinction to those who observe strict Islamic practices, as demonstrated in: "… religious conservatives… who want a more rigid Islam to be the encompassing Malay way of life" (Khoo 2006:127). This statement suggests that those who lead a stringent Islamic lifestyle are necessarily "conservative", which is problematic because without clearly defining what conservativeness entails, it has promoted the understanding that these individuals are refraining themselves from secularist acts.

Yet, the Malay interviewees' commitment to religious observances, as highlighted by Natalia's abstinence from physical intimacy in her socialisation with members of the opposite sex does not necessarily imply separation from secularist practices. As evident from the Malay female respondents' comments, conformity to religious norms does not stop them from engaging in "ordinary cosmopolitan" practices that Lamont and Aksartova (2002:2) describe as strategies people employ on an everyday basis to bridge ethnic differences. In Syuhada's case, ordinary cosmopolitanism involves normalising ethnic differences in cross-cultural friendships, and exhibiting religious tolerance by encouraging her friends to perform their prayer, regardless of their religious affiliations. The fact that they are able to interact positively with the male "other" implies that they are far from being "conservatives". This is because by engaging in encounters that require them to transcend not only ethnic but gender differences contest stringent Islamic ruling that encourage gender segregation in the socialisation of Muslims. Therefore, this shows that despite the huge impact of Islamisation as a social and political force on young women, as embodied by the Malay women's consciousness to exercise piety, it does not prevent them from engaging in behaviours that are in conflict with modernity.

Beyond using a religious lens to promote inter-culturalism, the respondents' religious sensitivities have also promoted progressive gender politics. Their interactions with non-Malay men have offered nuanced perspectives about gender relations in a way that may not be possible with Malay men. Discourses on the relations between Malay men and women have shown how deeply-entrenched hierarchical structures often

govern gender relations within the Malay family and society at large (Hanita 2015; Azza 2016). The entrenchment of such relations is attributed to the way in which rigid gender roles have been normalised in society. At the heart of it lies the basic assumption of male authority and superiority over women, which entails a sense of entitlement to guide, and as an extension to that, to discipline women. This alone presupposes a notion of male superiority, as he is already presumed to be capable of performing these roles by virtue of being male. Women are concurrently taught that they would be rewarded greatly in the afterlife for being obedient to their husbands, and punished severely if they fail to fulfill their obligations as dutiful wives or mothers. The onslaught of Islamisation in Malaysia has made it more convenient for patriarchal Malay men to utilise religion as a way to legitimise women's roles. Unlike women, men are not subject to similar ideologies concerning their roles in the private or public sphere, thereby promoting unequal and/or exploitative gender relations.

The Malay respondents expand current understandings of gender relations by showing that Malay women are not passive beings whose subjectivities are determined solely by their relations with Malay men. They highlighted their diverse subjectivities through several ways, including pointing to the intellectual stimulation and agency that they gain when interacting with non-Malay men, something that they do not enjoy in their interactions with Malay men. The views of Liza and Hana towards '*Sepet*' and '*Muallaf*' stood out to exemplify these. I quote their responses below, respectively, when asked about the female characters from the films that they could identify themselves with.

> Orked in '*Sepet*' is just like me in real life. She enjoys reading and watching movies from East Asia, just like me. She gets along better with Chinese men than with Malay men, again, just like me. You know why I don't like to mingle with Malay men? Because they are not avid readers. They are not aware of important global issues. Some claim to be religious but when you ask them about issues concerning the global Muslim community, like the Syrian refugees, they don't know anything about them. Surprisingly, Chinese men are more concerned about these issues!

> I can identify myself with the elder sister (Rohani) in '*Muallaf*'. Her relationship with the Chinese guy (Brian) is based on mutual respect. They remind each other about matters of religion, like when is the time for prayer. I would say my friendship with the Chinese guys I know is based on mutual respect as well. Like, when we have group meetings for assignments on Sunday mornings, I will ask my (Chinese male) friends if it interferes with their church service. If it does, I will tell them to stop, go for their service and continue later, to which they comply. But when I do that to Malay guys on Fridays,[11] they will either dismiss it or get annoyed by me telling them what to do.

The excerpts show that the women are able to offer alternative meanings to gender relations through their interactions with non-Malay men. Interestingly, Malay women have utilised the very tool that patriarchal Malay men use to perpetuate unequal gender relations, which is religion, in order to widen normative constructs of their female identity. For example, Liza broadens state constructs of the modern Muslim woman, which are often limited to her relationship with her family and local communities by expressing concerns for the *ummah*, which refers to the global Muslim community. The concept of *ummah* traverses national borders and transcends the individual consciousness. Her critique of Malay men's lack of global consciousness vis-à-vis their non-Malay counterparts offers an alternative picture of the unopiniated Malay women who passively accept male power. Likewise, Hana's friendship with Chinese men once again reformulates the role of religion in promoting equal gender relations. Although she did not elaborate on why Malay men would often dismiss her instructions, the very fact that they do not acknowledge her advice already signifies a hierarchical gender relationship. Religion, which is often used as an instrument to justify male power, is ironically disregarded in this case to reinstate male power. Just like Liza, Hana does not subscribe to commonplace understandings of religion but uses it as a tool to transcend communal parochialism. In this regard, both Liza and Hana embody what Khairudin (2017) terms as 'gender cosmopolitanism'. By manifesting their agency in innovative ways that do not couch their Muslim identity as a Malay religion, but as a universal faith that embraces people of all backgrounds,

[11] A weekly congregational prayer at the mosques that is compulsory for Muslim males.

these women have deconstructed normative understandings of gender relations within the Malay community, as well as of Malay female subjectivities in contemporary Malaysia.

6.2.3 Respondents' Interpretations of Inter-Ethnic Relations in 'Gadoh'

This section examines the respondents' engagement with the film '*Gadoh*'. Alongside researchers who investigate how religion can be used to address studies that adopt the intersectional framework without de-emphasising the enduring importance of ethnicity (Clycq 2012; Weber 2015), I have selected '*Gadoh*' as a starting point for discussion given its strong ethnicised content and its role as a film that all the students were required to watch for the film screening session. The findings demonstrate that the respondents' interpretations are divided along gender lines. While the male students generally downplayed the ethnic dimension when explaining the cause of the inter-ethnic tensions among the characters, the female students exhibited a heightened consciousness of ethnic difference when articulating their thoughts on the film. Table 6.2 below reveals the findings when asked whether they thought that ethnic differences are the main cause of the conflicts and fights among the characters in the film.

Table 6.2: Respondents' Position on Whether Ethnic Differences is the Main Cause of the Fighting Incidents in *Gadoh*

Gender	**M**	**M**	**M**	**M**	**F**	**F**	**F**	**F**
Ethnicity	**Malay**	**Chinese**	**Indian**	**Non-Malay Bumiputera**	**Malay**	**Chinese**	**Indian**	**Non-Malay Bumiputera**
Ethnicity is the main factor	9	6	5	2	9	7	6	3
Ethnicity is not the main factor	14	5	2	3	5	3	2	2
Neutral	0	2	0	0	3	2	0	1
Total	**23**	**13**	**7**	**5**	**17**	**12**	**8**	**6**

As the figures demonstrate, more female (55.6% or 25 out of 45) than male respondents (43% or 22 out of 51) thought that differences in the characters' ethnic backgrounds explain why they often fight with one another. Majority of the male respondents, regardless of ethnic backgrounds, attributed the fighting incidents in '*Gadoh'* to the desire of the male characters to exhibit their 'male ego' rather than to ethnic differences. Among those who blamed the latter, most ended up qualifying their statements or contradicting themselves by saying that students of the same ethnicity may also fight with one another due to a slew of reasons. When asked to discuss the film in relation to their high school experience, I noticed a shift in position among those male respondents who cited ethnic difference as a major causal factor at first. Such sentiments are embodied by Rizuan, a Malay student, and Mohan, an Insian student, as quoted below:

> It ('*Gadoh*') is like what happens in my school; Chinese fighting with Malays, or Malays fighting with Indians (pause)… But guys fight not just because they are not happy with other races. Chinese and Chinese also can fight. When Malays fight with Malays, Indians sometimes will also come and help their Malay friends (who got injured during the fight). As for the girls, they fight also. But usually, they fight because of guys, over boyfriends.

> Yes, I agree that ethnic differences are what cause the students in '*Gadoh*' to fight. But sometimes guys fight because they want to prove their ego. They can fight over anything, even over small matter... In my secondary school class, I can say that 80% are Malays. They can fight among themselves also because they are not happy with one another. They just want to prove themselves.

Unlike the male respondents, ethnicity forms a significant aspect of the female respondents' narratives. The ethnic dimension features prominently in both their engagement with the film as well as their account of inter-ethnic experience in school. This is especially so among the Indian and Chinese students. An Indian student, Renuka, and Chinese student, Xueli, illustrate this point:

> '*Gadoh*' is so representative of '1 Malaysia', which emphasises the three main races. It shows how the students fight along racial lines just like how the '1 Malaysia' campaign aims to unite them along these same lines.
>
> In my school, the Chinese guys like to fight with the Malay guys. They are very clique-ish, just like the students in '*Gadoh*'. The two races are always not happy with each other, like to call each other names and pick a fight.

To explore why more female respondents invoked ethnicised narratives, I analysed their profile and probed their inter-ethnic experience in high school and university. The students' profile reveals that more female than male students attended the non-Malay medium national schools *Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan* (SJKs) than the Malay-medium ones or *Sekolah Kebangsaan* (SKs). As Table 6.3 below shows, 22.2% (or 10 out of 45) non-Malay females attended SJKs compared to only 7.84% (or 4 out of 51) non-Malay males. The type of schools they attended has a huge influence on their conception of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. Specifically, those who attended SJKs articulated more ethnicised comments than those who attended SKs or international schools. Out of these 10 females, 4 are Buddhists, 3 are Christians and 3 are Hindus. The higher proportion of females than males attending such schools will be explained below.

Table 6.3: Student Enrolment in Secondary School

Gender	**M**	**M**	**M**	**M**	**F**	**F**	**F**	**F**
Ethnicity	**Malay**	**Chinese**	**Indian**	**Non-Malay Bumiputera**	**Malay**	**Chinese**	**Indian**	**Non-Malay Bumiputera**
Attended SK	23	10	7	3	16	4	5	3
Attended SJK	0	3	0	1	0	6	3	1
Attended international school	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	2
Total	**23**	**13**	**7**	**5**	**17**	**12**	**8**	**6**

An analysis of the excerpts indicates that those female students who attended SJKs invoked comments that accentuated race when asked about their motivation to enroll in such schools. On the other hand, the four male students who attended SJKs cited practical considerations that are not related to ethnicity, such as geographical accessibility, as the main reason for attending those schools. The beliefs expressed by the female students about the ethnic stereotypes portrayed in '*Gadoh*' are also consistent with their off-screen value systems. For instance, a Chinese Buddhist female respondent, Shi Ting, who attended an SJK in high school, mentioned that what motivated her father to enroll her in an SJK is due to the deeply ingrained stereotypes that Malays from SKs are lazy and unruly:

> It's true that students of different races like to fight with each other, especially those from *Sekolah Kebangsaan.* The reason why my parents enrolled me in *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan* is because of stereotypes about students from *Sekolah Kebangsaan*. They are scared that I will become a bad girl, a lazy girl when I mix with Malays. Sorry to say all these but I have to tell this honestly. My father don't [sic] let me be friends with Malays since I was young. He don't [sic] let me play with them. He don't [sic] allow me to go out and play with my Malay neighbours. Again, sorry to say all these but my father is the typical Chinese. So he insists that I go to a Chinese school even though he cannot afford the school fees.

Besides Shi Ting, other Chinese female students such as Ying, also a Buddhist, who is quoted below, has also attended SJK for the same reason. The excerpt below encapsulates Ying's agreement with the lazy Malay stereotype in '*Gadoh*', which to her, indeed resembles reality:

> My parents enrol me in SJK in Perak (a state in Peninsular Malaysia) because there are no fights there. The discipline is very strict... It's all Chinese there [sic]. In my class, there is only one Malay, but she can speak Mandarin very well. My parents want me to be in that school because the students there are hardworking. But when I come to Unitar, it's different. Whenever assignment submission deadline is coming,

> usually it's the Malay students who will ask me whether they can copy assignment from me. If I don't let them copy, they will ask me why they can't copy. Another thing is during group assignment. If a question has many parts, they will take the easy part and let us (Chinese) take the more difficult parts. This makes me think they are really lazy.

An Indian student, Sreeja, who also attended an SJK, disagreed with Shi Ting that racism only exists in SKs and explained that ethnic prejudice was strong in her school as well:

> You may think that racism only exists in *Sekolah Kebangsaan* like the one the students in '*Gadoh*' attended. But, in fact, it is also found in *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan.* Like when I was studying in an Indian-dominated all-girls school, there was this sense of consciousness about other races in the school. I guess it's because we Malaysians already have this sense that people from another race is different from us. We tend to grow up with friends from the same neighbourhood who are from the same race as us. In school, I could feel myself being cautious about the other races most of the time. I didn't like that feeling!

The other non-Malay female students who have attended SJKs expressed comments that are laced with gendered and religious overtones when rationalising their choice of high school. The excerpts below cite the experiences of Jia Hui and Xijia, who are a Christian and Buddhist respectively. In making reference to the film '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*', they concurred with the anxieties of the parents of the heroine, Angela, who have qualms about her dating a Malay man.

> For me, I studied at an all-girls school, a *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan.* It's a Christian school, so I'm able to practise my religion freely. And because it is an all-girls school, my mum didn't have to worry about me dating Malay men. My mum said if you marry Malay men, they will not treasure you. They will take another wife behind your back.

> I went to *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan* because my parents don't want me to mix with other races. They are scared that when I mix with Malay boys, I will fall in love with them and end up marrying them. If you marry Malays, you have to convert to Islam, which is going to be difficult since Islam is a strict religion.

The above sentiments affirm scholarly works that highlight ethnic segregation in the Malaysian education system. According to authors like Tan and Santhiram (2014), most Malaysian students only have had brief encounters with members of other ethnic groups until schooling age due to the dominance of certain ethnicities in the residential areas they grow up in. Malays dominate rural villages, Chinese mostly reside in urban centres, whereas Indians are scattered in rural estates on urban peripheries. Even as they reach schooling age, their parents may not send them to SKs that are more culturally diverse (Tan and Santhiram 2014). Sreeja's claim that "there was this sense of consciousness about other races in the school" is legitimate, as the government's policy of establishing schools with different media of instruction, such as the SJKs, in order to fulfill the linguistic and cultural needs of different ethnicities at the primary and secondary levels has only reinforced ethnic prejudice and animosity (Chai 1971). The social divisiveness of segregated schools becomes even more evident with the surge of Islamisation and implementation of preferential policies for the Malays under the aegis of the NEP, as the government sets up Islamic religious institutions and fully residential school systems that cater to the Malays. Hence, although the Malaysian educational system claims to provide a common system of mainstream education to foster national integration among the various ethnicities, it at the same time allows for the coexistence of alternative streams of education to cater to the needs of different ethnicities.

Academic writings often attribute non-Malay student enrolment in SJKs to their parents' desire to preserve their ethnic identities through the learning of the vernacular language and culture (Lee 2012; Tan and Santhiram 2014). The Malay-dominated state policies, together with the entrenchment of the discourse of Malay primacy (or '*Ketuanan Melayu*'), have resulted in the curriculum of government schools being conducted mostly in Malay, and increasingly being influenced by

Islam (Barr and Govindasamy 2010). They have also fostered an environment in national schools where non-Malays are discriminated against by the ethnocentric attitudes and behavior of the predominantly Malay teaching and administrative staff (Lee 2012). The increasing Islamisation of national schools has only worsened non-Malay parents' perception of such schools as intolerant of non-Malay students.

However, what are often overlooked are the underlying narratives that explain the actual reasons for the enrolment of non-Malay students in SJKs from the perspectives of the students. As the above excerpts have proven, the parents of Shi Ting, Ying, Jia Hui and Xijia enrolled them in SJKs mainly due to their deeply entrenched stereotypes about Malays rather than concerns about the need to preserve their culture. The respondents themselves seem to have been more influenced by their parents' anxieties rather than state ideologies aimed at strengthening Islamic hegemony. Parental influence has shaped their perception of those from other ethnicities to a large extent. As the next section demonstrates, the same students who harbour negative stereotypes against the Malays while in high school, particularly Shi Ting and Xijia, will go on to embody similar sentiments towards Malay women in their adulthood. This is evident from their interpretation of the character Orked in '*Sepet*', proving that their on-screen values are consistent with their values in real life.

Based on the above narratives, I argue that the institutionalisation of Islamisation is not solely ideological. Borrowing from the Foucauldian notion of 'discipline', the impact of Islamisation on Malaysians' lives is derived not merely from state power but is enacted laterally as well, insofar as the process of normalisation relies on subjects' participation (Foucault *et. al.* 1991; Foucault 1995). In its attempt to cater to Malay interests, the state has put in place a structural environment that fosters an ethnically polarized society. However, the full effect of disciplining non-Malay conformity to the segregatory policies work only when the non-Malay subjects negotiate the structural conditions in tandem with other subjects doing so. In the case of my non-Malay female respondents, this negotiation takes the form of their choice of schools in an attempt to distance themselves from the Malays, thereby reinforcing ethnic polarization in Malaysia. This attempt to alienate themselves from the Malays is further enhanced by the way in which their gender identity is enmeshed with their

religious subjectivity. The reason why the non-Malay female respondents exhibit a higher ethnic consciousness than the male participants is not merely due to anxieties over their perceived marginalised position as an ethnic minority. Rather, it is attributed to the perception that both their religious and gendered statuses will be at stake based on normative understandings of Malay/Muslim patriarchy. The next section will provide further justifications as to how the women's gendered experiences contribute to their heightened ethnic consciousness.

6.2.4 Non-Malay Women's Relations with Malay Women

A further analysis of the comments expressed by the non-Malay women shows that their gendered experience as females has largely influenced their ethnicised mindsets. This experience is attributed to the politicisation of the body by the authorities. In Malaysia, the bodies of women, especially Muslim women have become the site through which authorities enforce Malay/Muslim power. The Islamic concept of '*aurat*' has been central to the formation of Malay/Muslim identity. '*Aurat*' is the part of the body that the Islamic law requires Muslims to cover in order to protect their moral decency. According to mainstream Islamic teachings, while a woman's *aurat* is defined as the whole body except for the face and palms, men's *aurat* is the part between the navel and knees. A tangible marker of observing this Islamic piety is through the wearing of the headscarf or *tudung* among Muslim women (Tong and Turner 2013).

However, the discourse on Islamic morality is not limited to Muslims only. The bodies of minority ethnic communities have also become the site through which the authorities institutionalise Malay/Muslim hegemony in Malaysia. Mainstream media reported that several government departments had enforced conservative dress codes even onto non-Muslims (Kumar 2015; The Straits Times 29 June 2015). As such, many Chinese women who had shown up in government agencies in knee-length skirts were forced to wear the sarongs by the authorities. Amidst this controversy, the clergyman of the state of Perak, Tan Sri Harussani Zakaria, emphasised the importance of imposing this control of having non-Muslims dress more appropriately in public places "out of respect for Muslims who will sin upon seeing people,

including non-Muslims, who do not cover their "*aurat*". He added that Malaysians should be receptive to this idea as Malaysia is an "Islamic role model country" (Kumar 2015). News reports have shown that even non-Malay men are no exception to this regulation. In May 2015, an ethnic Chinese businessman, Wilson Ng was told to put on long pants by airport authorities before he was allowed to enter Kuala Lumpur International Airport's lost-and-found baggage office after he had shown up in knee-length shorts (Kumar 2015; The Straits Times 29 June 2015). Thus, this shows how local gender politics, through the regulation of bodies, have been appropriated to intensify ethnic politics in Malaysia.

Nevertheless, my data shows that more non-Muslim women than non-Muslim men are affected by these regulations. In my interviews, 6 non-Malay women raised the controversy regarding the over-exposure of women's *aurat* in '*Sepet*' when asked about their thoughts on the film. In '*Sepet*', the female characters have been criticised for not upholding their Muslim values on screen by not observing their *aurat*. Even though Orked is always dressed in the traditional Malay outfit called the *baju kurung* when she hangs out, she is often seen wearing the sarong at home. Likewise, Orked's mother is also depicted in the sarong, such as in the scenes where she is dancing with Orked's father and lying with him in bed, which led the critics to accuse of the film as having "pornographic elements" (Khoo 2009a).

When I asked all the respondents whether they have encountered any inconvenience at school or in the course of growing up due to their ethnic or religious background, the same respondents who articulated concerns about the characters' *aurat* in Sepet voiced out about the unpleasant experiences that they had encountered pertaining to their *aurat*, affirming that their concerns about the *aurat* issue in *Sepet* are aligned with their day-to-day predicament. Although the rest of the non-Malay women did not bring up similar concerns about the films, 8 of them from the group interviews shared that they have also experienced inconveniences related to their *aurat* in their day-to-day lives when they heard the other interview participants raising this point. In contrast, none of the non-Malay men mentioned anything about *aurat*, be it in relation to the films or their everyday lives. The comments below reflect some of the non-Malay women's awareness of the Islamic ruling on the *aurat.* These comments were

expressed, respectively, by Janet, a Sino Kadazan by ethnicity who is of Christian faith, Beng Lan, a Chinese student who is a Buddhist, and Puneeta, an Indian student who is a Hindu.

> I enjoy watching '*Sepet*', but one thing I find problematic about the film is that there are a lot of '*berkemban*' scenes ('*berkemban*' means wearing the sarong tied around the midriff) (Figure 6.3). As far as I'm concerned, a Muslim woman shouldn't be showing her '*aurat*'. It's indecent.
>
> '*Sepet*' is controversial because the women don't cover their *aurat*. In Malaysia, even the Chinese must cover their *aurat* sometimes because the Malays find it disrespectful.
>
> I don't remember what were the reviews for this film. I only remember that there were a lot of controversies because the women were seen wearing sarong. You know, not covering their *aurat* properly.

Figure 6.3: This is one of the many scenes from '*Sepet*' that depicts Malay women in sarongs

To examine the extent to which the female students' concerns are affected by the state's regulation on the body, I examined the responses by the 14 non-Muslim female respondents who mentioned '*aurat*' in the interviews and coded them accordingly. The results show that the majority of their unpleasant experiences are due to the everyday microagressions they face as non-Muslims rather than the inconveniences brought about by the regulations enforced by the authorities per se. Specifically, 11 of

them have experienced inconveniences related to their *aurat* on a personal level whereas only three others have experienced it as a direct consequence of state-imposed sanctions. Those who have experienced the former include Beng Lan and Margaret, a Chinese-Christian respondent, whom I cite below:

> When I turned up at a Malay friend's house for a group assignment in a tube, she asked why I was dressed up like that. I asked her, why cannot? She said because it's rude to her culture and religion. I find it strange because there are no males in the house at that time… I understand that Malays who are conservative must cover up, but don't impose your beliefs onto others!

> Although my Malay friends are fine with me wearing whatever I like, I will usually avoid wearing revealing outfit to school. Although they don't say it out loud, I can sense that they sometimes don't feel comfortable especially when I wear sleeveless. My male friends (who are non-Muslims) don't feel it because they will usually wear jeans to school. Those Muslims whom I know are not so conservative, I will be less cautious of what I wear whenever I hang out with them.

On the other hand, Janet exemplifies inconveniences that arose due to the regulations imposed by authorities, as expressed below:

> While staying in UiTM hall (student hostel) during an attachment programme, in the morning, the Malays have to wake up and pray. But the school authorities forced us to wake up also, go to *surau* (prayer place) and do nothing. Also, when we have to take picture for our student card, for those who dyed their hair, even though you are non-Muslim, if you don't dye it black (which is a requirement who those who do not cover their hair), then you have to wear a *tudung* (headscarf).

The findings also show that the daily microagressions faced by the non-Muslim women largely shape their perceptions of and relations with Muslims, in particular, Muslim women. The way in which the body has become a site through which Islamic piety has been defined in Malaysia has unfortunately reduced their understanding of Muslim women purely in terms of outward physical markers, which affect their choice of friends. The non-Muslim females define Muslim women into two essentialist categories- the 'religious' and 'non-religious' ones. The former is typically conceived as those who don the headscarf, who observe Islamic laws and regulations, and who only mingle with those from the same ethnicity. On the other hand, the latter embody all the opposite characteristics of the former. Based on the excerpts below, it can be deduced that non-Muslim women have a better impression of and are more comfortable hanging out with Muslim women who do not wear the headscarf than with those who do, as those who do not are deemed more "liberal" and "modern". The views of Chinese-Buddhist students like Xijia and Shi Ting below are illustrative of the views held by the non-Muslim female respondents.

> Xijia: I like Orked because she easily becomes friends with others without looking at their skin colour. She's also very liberal.
>
> Me: Why did you say she's liberal?
>
> Xijia: Because she doesn't wear the *tudung* (Muslim headscarf).
>
> Me: So those Malays who wear the *tudung* are not liberal?
>
> Xijia: Yeah *lah*. They are more traditional.
>
> Me: Traditional in what sense?
>
> Xijia: Traditional because they are very religious. Everyone knows that if a Muslim girl wears the *tudung*, she is religious.
>
> Me: As for yourself, how many of your Muslim friends are "traditional" and how many are "modern"?

Xijia: 20% to 80%. 20% traditional.

***

Shi Ting: Orked is very modern. She didn't bother which race her friend is, whether her boyfriend is Malay or Chinese. In today's society, it doesn't matter anymore who you couple (are dating) with.

Me: In what other ways is she modern?

Shi Ting: The way she talks, the way she dress [sic]. In the film, even though she's always seen wearing the *baju kurung*, we also see that she never wear the tudung [sic]. Among my Malay friends, usually those who *don't wear tudung never pray one* (Sub-standard English for "those who do not wear the headscarf often do not observe the five-time daily prayer). Easier to hang out with them also 'cos they don't need to pray. *It's always like that one* (Sub-standard English for "This is always the case".)

Me: But Orked does pray even though she doesn't wear the *tudung*. Can you recall, in the beginning of the film ('*Sepet*'), she is shown reading the Quran after her prayer?

Shi Ting: Hmm… (pause). Yeah. Then maybe she's different. But usually those who wear *tudung* will stick to themselves. I don't know why also. Maybe the situation is different in Singapore. But in Malaysia, Malays will stick with Malays. Chinese with Chinese.

I argue that the non-Muslim women's perceptions of and relations with Muslim women reveal several facts about the institutionalisation of Islamisation that highlight the full range of its effects. They show that normative ideas about what constitutes pious or impious Muslims are not necessarily brought about by the macro processes of Islamisation. To conclude that the non-Muslim women's understanding of Muslims is

influenced by state-dictated images of Islam is problematic, as this suggests that state-society relations are necessarily dialectical. The state has indeed provided the structural conditions that have helped to form public imagination of Malay women, as exemplified by its constructs of the 'ideal' Malay women. Under the influence of Islamic revivalism in the late 1970s, UMNO had promoted such distinctive ethno-religious signifiers as the headscarf as the 'appropriate' clothing for the 'modern' but culturally grounded Malay women. The way in which it has institutionalised this image is through the imposition of dress codes for the female members of its Women's Wing and Youth Wing, who are required to wear the headscarf and *baju kurung* in order to represent the image of the progressive and politically empowered Malay women (Stivens 2000). At the extreme end of the spectrum are state policies that enforce dress codes onto non-Muslims, which require them to cover their *aurat* in order to gain entry into government buildings as a "show of respect" to Muslims, sparking off huge controversy and uproar among those who feel that the state should not impose their Islamic values onto non-Muslims (The Straits Times 29 June 2015).

However, for these constructs to be fully institutionalised, they require the collective internalisation of those images by the public that legitimise the government as an effective power actor. As the findings have shown, there are indeed moments when societal perceptions of Muslim women are not informed solely by state-dictated images of them, but rather by the interviewees' own assumptions and commonly held streotypes of the latter. Without considering the diverse expressions of Islamic piety, non-Muslims have inaccurately and problematically equated headscarved Muslim women with conservativeness and ethnic exclusivity whereas those who do not wear the headscarf are considered otherwise. This association is problematic because as research has shown, the headscarf has in fact been a symbol of the modern Muslim woman who enjoys increasing political agency (Stivens 2000). Thus, while the notion of the headscarf has shifted from one of oppression and backwardness to one of empowerment within the Muslim circle, it has remained static among the non-Muslims. This affirms the divergence of non-Muslim understanding of Islam from state discourses about it.

While films like those directed by Yasmin Ahmad have attempted to broaden expressions of Malay-Muslim piety, they run the risk of reinforcing the dichotomous

images of Muslim women constructed by mainstream media by focusing only on the narratives of non-headscarf wearing women. In Yasmin's films, Orked is meant to epitomise the modern Muslim woman. In showing that there is no singular way of being a Muslim, Orked's tolerance and compassion towards other ethnicities exemplify multiple expressions of Islamic piety. Despite not wearing the headscarf, Orked is seen reading the Quran after her prayer, which implies that non-hijab wearing women can also embody piety. This scene of Orked reading the Quran is also juxtaposed against that of her opening the cupboard in her room that is full of the posters of her Japanese-Taiwanese pop star obsession, Takeshi Kaneshiro (Figure 6.4). This is meant to highlight Orked's pursuit of achieving a balance in both spiritual attainments for the hereafter and worldly indulgence, which challenges strict Islamic teaching that regards the latter activity as directly oppositional to Islam. It is due to Orked's embracement of diversity that Khoo (2009:112-113) interprets Yasmin's films as having cosmopolitan sensibilities, which she refers to as "a philosophy [that] holds to a sense of shared humanity committed to common values based on mutual respect and universal rights that transcend ethnic and national loyalties".

Figure 6.4: Viewers get a glimpse of the posters of Japanese-Taiwanese actor Takeshi Kaneshiro as Orked opens her cupboard

However, in the attempt to contest the monolithic image of the Muslim woman, the discourse has not been extended to the way in which headscarf-wearing women express their femininity in the midst of modernisation. This is perplexing given that the sight of these women is commonplace since the surge of Islamisation in Malaysia (Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010). For instance, the way in which headscarf-wearing women interact with members of other ethnic groups in Malaysia are seldom

portrayed in both mainstream and independent media. Thus, the lack of exposure to the heterogeneous attitudes and behavious of Malay women may have led non-Malays like Beng Lan, Xijia and Shi Ting to erroneously assume that those Malays who do not put on the headscarf are "conservative" and ethnically exclusive.

Furthermore, even though Yasmin's films seek to promote cosmopolitan sensibilities by blurring ethnic boundaries, I argue that at times, they reinstate ethnic differences. For example, although Orked is portrayed as the epitome of the modern Malay woman, she is simultaneously often featured in the sarong and *baju kurung* in '*Sepet*', and the *kebaya* in '*Gubra*'. I concur with Hanita (2015), who contends that such portrayals are meant to accentuate the signifier of her ethnicity in differentiating herself against the ethnic 'other', which is Jason in the former film (Figure 6.5) and Alan in the latter film (Figure 6.6). Although these films may have encouraged an understanding of Malay modernity that is not necessarily synonymous with Westernisation, their portrayals of Islam and Malay sexuality through the stereotypical images of Malay women in traditional outfit that can be considered "exotic" paradoxically perpetuates colonialist discourses that ride on the dichotomy of the 'backward East' versus the 'modern West'. Featuring women in the traditional outfit runs the risk of what Noritah (2011:163) refers to as "self-orientalism", which implicitly endorses that Asia represents "tradition". Thus, the excessive portrayals of Orked in the traditional outfit can be interpreted as an enforced version of Asian modernity, the manifestation of which must necessarily be signified in outward physical appearance.

Figure 6.5: Orked is often featured wearing the *baju kurung* in '*Sepet*'. The only scene in which she is shown wearing casual 'modern' outfit is when she hangs out with her Malay friends after she has stopped seeing Jason upon discovering that he has made another girl pregnant, validating scholarly assumptions that the *baju kurung* is meant to highlight her Malayness.

Figure 6.6: Orked is portrayed wearing the kebaya for the first time in '*Gubra*' in the scene where she meets Alan after parting ways with her Malay husband Arif who had cheated on her. In the previous scenes featuring Orked and Arif, Orked is seen wearing plain shirts and singlets.

Unlike Yasmin's representations of Malay women, the female Malay respondents whom I interviewed challenge Yasmin's enforced images of the Malay woman by embodying multiple understandings of modernity. Despite coming across as demure, soft-spoken and predominantly Malay-speaking, these female respondents are far from being "traditional" and passive. They were able to articulate their views confidently, which reflect their conscientisation about the wide range of issues affecting the society at large, thereby challenging simplistic filmic representations that often portray the modern woman as someone who is necessarily outspoken and predominantly English-speaking. Regrettably, Yasmin Ahmad herself seemed to conform to this overly simplified notion of the modern woman. As she was sharing with the audience in a TED talk in KL, her choice of selecting Sharifah Amani as the lead actress in many of her films was due to the latter's 'charisma'. Though Yasmin did not elaborate on what she meant by 'charisma', we can presume that it refers to Amani's embodiment of traits deemed to be atypical of Malays, as evidenced by the

latter's own confession that she would "sound stupid" if she spoke in Malay in her thank you address after winning the 'Best Actress Award' in the 19th Malaysian Film Festival (Utusan Online 15th August 2006).

Out of the 19 Muslim women I interviewed, only three of them do not wear the headscarf. Among those who do, they usually put on trendy outfits that still observe religious rules rather than the "traditional" *baju kurung* to campus, which contests simplistic cinematic portrayals of "pious" women. These headscarved women prove that religion and modernity can co-exist alongside each other. They have also extended state constructs of the meanings behind the headscarf, which are often politicised. Rather than identifying the headscarf with politicised Islam, they define it in terms of how they are keeping up with the latest headscarf fashion trends in order to appear stylish. This subjectivity takes places in light of the booming Muslim fashion industry worldwide that offers a range of chic outfit for Muslim women that need not contradict their religious values. In Muslim-majority Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, this is constitutive of what Williams and Kamaludeen (2017) term as the "hijabista" and "hijabster" phenomena. The former refers to the portmanteau of "hijab" and "fashionista" whereas the latter is an amalgamation of "hijab" and "hipster". Compared to the more collective identity of the former, which is formed mostly through mass and social media networks where young women take part in discourses about beauty and fashion, the latter lacks a cohesive ideological structure that would articulate resistance through style despite its embodiment of progressive identity. Regardless of the terminological distinctions, both identity labels reflect the hijabista and hijabster phenomena as heavily tied to media production and consumption. Drawing upon the complex relations of these phenomena to issues of class, education, media and religion, Williams and Kamaludeen (2017) argue that these emerging cultural identities no longer simply represent young women appropriating the scarf to disrupt traditional Islamic conceptions of piety but function as part of a broader process of contemporary identity politics in which the micro experiences of young women are intricately interweaved with the macro processes of contemporary capitalism and governance.

When I asked these women about their thoughts on how their experience as covered Muslim women relate to the way in which the female characters interact with

members of a different ethnicity and gender in the films, most of them expressed comments that exhibit an understanding of Islam that is based on individual religious subjectivities rather than conformance to society's idealised notion of a good Muslim woman. Azrah, a Malay woman who puts on the headscarf, is one such woman who speaks from this position:

> In '*Sepet*', Orked is usually seen in the *baju kurung*. In 'Talentime' also. Melur always wears traditional outfit. In actual life, we Malaysians only wear the *baju kurung* during Hari Raya (Eid Festival). Even so, the kind of *baju kurung* we wear is the more modern version. Maybe Orked and Melur wear the *baju kurung* because they feel proud of their Malay identity. But for us, we wear it because the loose cutting does not show our figure. Same reason as to why we wear the headscarf. You wear because it is a religious obligation, not because you have to identify yourself as Malay.

In response to Azrah's comment above, Zalia, another Malay interviewee from Azrah's group added:

> If I may add, on the point of religious obligation, you may notice that some women in Malaysia wear the *tudung* but leave their arms exposed. Like, for example, they wear the *tudung* but wear T-shirt, which goes against the whole point of wearing *tudung*. I think these women wear it because it is like a trend to them. Other people wear it, so they also wear. So to them, regardless of whatever top you wear, as long as you wear *tudung*, you are a good Muslim already. But to me, being a good Muslim means so much more than that. You have to observe your interaction with members of the opposite gender, et cetera. So for example, like Orked, she may be covered up in the *baju kurung* but at the same time, she is intimate with Jason. So I wouldn't say she is a good Muslim.

Other respondents like Niza rejected the idea that a Muslim women's attire is a source of tension between Muslims and non-Muslims, as according to her, the tension

between veiled and non-veiled Muslim women in West Malaysia is more strained than inter-ethnic tensions. This is highlighted in a conversation between Niza and Jumah:

> Niza: Here in *Semenanjung* (West Malaysia), there is a strong segregation between those who wear tudung and those who don't. Those who wear *tudung* will look down on those who don't. I come from Sarawak but went to a high school in Selangor. In Sarawak, if a Muslim woman does not wear the *tudung*, it's not an issue. People will not talk behind your back. So the tension here is not so much between Muslims and non-Muslims, but amongst Muslims themselves.
>
> Jumah: You are lucky because you wear tudung. For people like me who don't wear *tudung*, people will always ask why I never wear, but I feel one should not wear the *tudung* to meet society's expectation. One should wear it out of sincerity, out of the understanding that Muslim women should cover their *aurat*.

The sentiments that are represented by these women challenge works that define visible markers of religion like the headscarf as a source of tension between Muslims and non-Muslims. In many of these works, the headscarf is constructed not just as a definite indication of good character and morals, but construed as a marker of distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims in multi-ethnic countries like Malaysia (Parker 2008; Tong and Turner 2013). For instance, borrowing Hannerz's (1980) concept of a "visual cue", Tong and Turner (2013) argue that beyond the obvious fact that the headscarf is an immediate sign that can be used to identify Muslims, it also speaks of a lifestyle that is antithetical to norms and values that are non-Islamic. Parker (2008:5) has also postulated that Muslim women wear the veil "not so much because they had to but because it had become the normative socio-religious practice of their community." Unlike these works, the Muslim women in my study have proven that their choice of wearing or not wearing the headscarf is not and should not be based on society's expectation of the dress code for Muslim women but rather,

their personal commitment to adhering to religious rules. Their narratives do not even reflect identification with discourses that associate the headscarf with Malayness. In fact, for some women like Azrah, the headscarf should not even be a symbol of ethnic identity, as she had expressed in: "You wear because it is a religious obligation, not because you have to identify yourself as Malay." As such, the way in which Muslim women negotiate state discourses on the modern Muslim women is by framing their femininity largely in terms of religiosity rather than ethnicity.

6.3 Inter-Ethnic Romance

In this section, I will focus my inquiry on representations of heteronormative relationships in films. I will not discuss alternative forms of sexuality due to two main reasons. First, there are neither hints of non-heterosexuality nor same-sex attraction in any of the films under study. Homosexuality and non-heteronormative forms of relationships are still considered taboo topics to be screened in public spaces in Malaysia. The only breach of heteronormativity from the filmography is a passing scene in Yasmin Ahmad's film 'Talentime', in which a school teacher Mr Anuar acts as a drag queen. However, the very idea that a man dresses up as a woman becomes slapstick comedy and does not go beyond that. Although transgenders and gay relationships have been shown in local cinemas before, such as in the films 'Spinning *Gasing*' (Spinning Top) (dir. Teck Tan, 2001), '*Gol & Gincu'* (Goals and Lipsticks) (dir. Bernard Chauly, 2005), '*Waris Jari Hantu'* (The Ghastly Heir) (dir. Shuhaimi Baba, 2007) and '*Histeria*' (Hysteria) (dir. James Lee, 2008), the portrayals are very discreet by international standards. The second reason is because none of my respondents indicated that they belong to the gender category of 'Others' when declaring their gender identity in the forms where they filled in their personal particulars prior to the interviews. Even though it is difficult to ascertain this disclosure, it would suffice to speculate that their consistent conformity to normative notions of femininity and masculinity in their responses would render them heterosexual males and females.

In my interviews, I was interested in exploring the respondents' interpretations of the films that have inter-ethnic romantic relationships as their main theme. These are the same films that I analysed in the previous two empirical chapters, which include

'*Sepet*', '*Estet*', '*29 Febuari*', 'The Journey', 'Talentime' and '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*'. Since all of my respondents have watched '*Sepet*' from the film screening sessions, I used it as a prompt to get them to discuss their thoughts on inter-ethnic romance. I enquired whether they felt that ethnicity is a significant aspect of the relationship between Jason and Orked in '*Sepet*'. If they agreed that it is an important aspect, it means that they viewed the couple's ethnic differences as a factor that needs to be negotiated in the couple's relationship. Otherwise, if they thought that it is unimportant, it basically means that they did not see it as an issue in the relationship.

The findings highlight a huge gender disparity in the respondents' interpretation. As Table 6.4 below shows, more female than male respondents regardless of ethnic backgrounds thought that ethnicity is a significant aspect of the couple's relationship. Specifically, 55.6% (or 25 out of 45) female undergraduates compared to 41.2% (or 21 out of 51) male undergraduates felt this way. The interviews show that the non-Malay Bumiputera women are the least concerned about the ethnicity of the characters, as inter-ethnic marriages are common in Sabah and Sarawak. On the other hand, the Chinese and Indian women from West Malaysia are the ones who felt that ethnic differences feature most prominently in the characters' romantic relationship.

Table 6.4: Respondents' Position on whether Ethnicity is the Main Factor in the Characters' Relationship

Gender	**M**	**M**	**M**	**M**	**F**	**F**	**F**	**F**
Ethnicity	**Malay**	**Chinese**	**Indian**	**Non-Malay Bumiputera**	**Malay**	**Chinese**	**Indian**	**Non-Malay Bumiputera**
Ethnicity is an important factor	7	7	5	2	8	8	8	1
Ethnicity is not an important factor	13	6	2	3	9	4	2	5
Neutral	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**23**	**13**	**7**	**5**	**17**	**12**	**10**	**6**

The concerns of the non-Malay females about the ethnic differences of characters involved in inter-ethnic romance are highlighted below. In the following excerpts, I

cite the responses of my Hindu respondents Renuka and Puneeta, who invoked the importance of ethnicity throughout my interviews with them:

> In a scene in '*Sepet*', Orked's father asked Orked's mother who Orked is dating. Orked's mother said "Chinese guy" (Figure 6.7). Then her father appears shocked that she is not dating Johari (her Malay friend). From here, we can tell that the guy's race is an issue to Orked's father. Any father would be concern about who their daughter is dating, especially Indian fathers. Indian fathers only want their daughters to go out with Indian guys... Don't even talk about going out with Malay guys. That's never going to happen.

Figure 6.7: Jason's ethnic background is accentuated in a conversation between Orked's father and mother, in which her father claims that some Malay women date Chinese men because they consider themselves modern.

> The film '*Estet*' tends to show only the good side of inter-ethnic relationship (Figure 6.8). The film doesn't show any problems faced by the Malay and Indian characters when they get together. In reality, our parents are very much against it if we date people of another race. We are allowed to mingle with other races but not more than that. Our parents are against it and we are also influenced by them. We should continue with that tradition for the next generation.

Figure 6.8: '*Estet*' features many dating scenes between Farid, the Malay hero, and Geetha, the Indian heroine. These scenes were interspersed with many singing and dancing scenes.

The respondents' ethnicised narratives can be explained by how ethnicity and gender are intertwined in the lives of the respective ethnic communities in Malaysia. The strong parental control of the dating lives of young Indian women reflects patriarchal practices of the Indian community that reinforce male domination and ensure the submission of Indian women. As Joseph (2014) argues, patriarchal constructs of Indian femininity, which include obedience and listening to one's parents, shape the roles, behaviours and social interactions deemed appropriate for the 'good' Indian girl. Puneeta's willingness to carry on the tradition where Indians will only date and marry Indians affirms this. The important role that Indian fathers play in their daughters' intimate relationships, as illustrated by Renuka, demonstrates how gender has become the site through which male members of marginalised groups, in this case, the Indians in Malaysia, exert their power where they are otherwise marginalised by the wider society and ethnic politics (Joseph 2014). The consequence of this is the suppression of agency and freedom of choice for Indian women.

Religion is also another factor in accounting for the stronger ideas about ethnicity that non-Malay females have than males. An analysis of the excerpts shows that the intersections between their religious, ethnicised and gendered subjectivities explain why more female than male respondents invoked ethnicity in their comments. The ways in which these social categories are mutually constituted in their perceptions of

other ethnicities are prominent when I asked them whether or not they would see themselves in an inter-ethnic romantic relationship, and are willing to embrace another religion for the sake of marriage. Interestingly, the narratives of the non-Malay women reveal that whenever the topic of inter-ethnic relationships emerged, the only ethno-religious identity that was problematised was Malay-Muslim. At no point during the interviews did they bring up potential issues regarding prospective relationships with non-Muslim men. Instead, they articulated concerns that revolve around unequal gender relations that may arise out of the perceived polygamous behaviour of Muslim men, and the assumption that rigid Islamic laws and norms favour men over women. My interviews with Devi, a Hindu, and Hui Wen, a Buddhist are representative of the sentiments of those non-Muslim females who articulated these concerns:

> Devi: The film '*Estet*' is about a Hindu girl who 'couples with' (dates) a Muslim man. 'Talentime' is also about inter-racial relationship, but it's the other way round- a Muslim girl 'coupling with' (dating) a Hindu boy. Both films only show the good side of inter-racial relationship, but actually, it would be difficult for us to adapt to the Muslim way of life. We have to pray five times a day, have to *puasa* (fast during Ramadan). Muslims are very strict about their religion!
>
> Me: What gives you this impression?
>
> Devi: People always say Muslims can't do this, this, this, can't eat pork, can't touch dogs. And I think this is true. When I see my Muslim friends, I can tell they are religious. They never fail to do their daily prayer.
>
> ***
>
> Hui Wen: When I think back about a short film I've watched about a Chinese girl dating a Malay boy (*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*), I find that the issue is not so much about what the Chinese girl's parents are

> concerned about- that Malay men are lazy. To me, I'm more concerned about Islam allowing Malay men to take on four wives.
>
> Me: Why did you say that?
>
> Hui Wen: My mum always say [sic] Malay men will take his wife for granted because their religion allows them to have a quota of four wives. I'm not sure how true this is, but when you look at the *ustaz* (religious teachers) around you and the male celebrities who take on two wives, what people say about Malay men and polygamy may be true after all.

While it may seem like women from ethnic minority groups have to overcome multiple challenges along the lines of gender, ethnicity and religion in an inter-ethnic relationship, what has remained absent in their narratives is the problematisation of gender relations in other cultural and religious traditions besides Islam. I argue that construing women's subordinate position largely in terms of gender obscures other systems of oppression, such as religious inequalities. The marginalisation of Islam as a religion has rendered the interplay between gender and ethno-religious issues of other religions largely invisible and uncontested. For instance, none of the non-Muslim respondents expressed concerns about the patriarchal practices of the Indian community. Instead, they seemed comfortable with the constructed knowledge that other cultures and religions are never as problematic as Islamic traditions.

The gendered concerns of inter-religious unions are not unique to the Malaysian context. They are also reflected in works on other multi-cultural and multi-religious cities worldwide. For instance, Clycq's (2012) article explores how the gendering of ethno-religious boundaries features prominently in the narratives of parents of Belgian, Italian and Moroccan descent living in Flanders, Belgium when the choice of their children's life partners are discussed. Similarly, Cila and Lalonde's (2014) work examines the role of religiosity, cultural identity and family connectedness on young Muslim Canadians' attitudes towards inter-faith dating and marriage. These works also show how the Muslim identity is often demonised in relation to other religious

identities. They also reflect gendered narratives that show how Muslim men are more privileged than their female counterparts when inter-ethnic relations are concerned.

However, unlike the Muslims in Belgium and Canada who belong to the minority population, Muslims form the majority population in Malaysia. Yet, their religion is often subject to intense scrutiny by the non-Muslims and is largely assumed to be intolerant. The issue at stake here does not concern the oppression of the religious minorities by a dominant majority. In fact, none of the non-Muslim respondents mentioned anything about being subordinated due to their gendered and religious backgrounds in their relationships with members of the opposite gender who are from a different religion. Their concerns regarding the unequal gender relations in Islam is predicated more upon their assumptions and perceptions of prevailing discourses than any direct personal experience. Neither did they reflect any indication that they were a result of misogynist state policies. Rather, sources of their concerns stemmed from parental influences and hearing common stereotypes about Islam. Moreover, although being Muslim strongly correlates with being Malay in Malaysia, the non-Muslim women did not express concerns regarding the pressure to adapt to Malay customs, or what scholars have termed as "*masuk Melayu*". It is differences in religious identities rather than cultural or ethnic backgrounds that have formed the basis of their concerns. This provides further evidence that in the construction of their individual subjectivities, Malaysian women need not necessarily identify with state constructs of ethnicity that often conflate ethnic identities with religiosity.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which young women in Malaysia engage with inter-ethnic themes portrayed in contemporary Malaysian films. It has set out to address the dearth of intersectional analyses of religion by exploring how religious women's agency may be interweaved in their articulations of gendered and ethnicised narratives. The findings point to several issues in the existing literature that adopt an intersectional approach towards examining the identities of women in Malaysia. Works on Malaysian women tend to produce oversimplified theories on how discourses of gender and ethnicity are mutually constituted in the Malaysian context.

Most of these works tend to naturalise such social categories as gender, ethnicity and religion as though they do not carry any social meanings. By doing little to elucidate the situated behaviour and subjectivities of individuals, as well as how they interact with one another on the micro level of everyday relations, these theories do not extend discussions on Malaysian multi-ethnicity beyond the paradigm of state domination and subordination of minority ethnic groups. Existing studies often normalise the hierarchical structures of ethnicity in the country by using notions of ethnicity and religion to reify macro-level hierarchies between ethnic groups. As a result, when research on local women are concerned, those works that engage with this approach often end up simplifying women's diverse experiences by concluding that female ethnic minorities simply experience more gender discrimination than Malay women. As the findings have shown, this is not always true, as Malay women and their religion are also subject to prejudice and scrutiny on the micro level of day-to-day relations even though they belong to the majority population. As Clycq (2012:160) cogently posits, "An intersectional approach towards identities cannot be limited to the study of marginalised subjects, as social identities always intersect with each other in a person, and a dominant ethnic identity can go hand-in-hand with a dominated [identity]." This reiterates that the social categorisations are not meaningless, but are laden with stereotypes about gendered and religious groups that have important consequences on inter-ethnic relations and marriages in Malaysia. As such, this chapter has sought to delve deeper into these meanings by exploring how intersectional frameworks can inform multiple understandings of religious identities beyond the domination/oppression paradigm.

The findings have underscored the importance of examining how religion interacts with other social identities, in this case ethnicity and gender, in order to enrich our understanding of the consequences of the state's ethnicisation of religion in contemporary Malaysia. Filmic images on gender, ethnicity and religion generate and impose hegemonic ideas about various ethnicities, but religious women appropriate these images through meaning-making to develop strategies for navigating everyday inter-ethnic relations and construct meaningful gender and religious identities in their everyday lives. Based on the data, I identify three main strategies that Malaysian women use to negotiate the impacts of Islamisation on their relations with Malaysians of other ethnicities. In relating to non-Malay men, Malay women **normalise** their

ethnic differences by appropriating religious norms to forge close friendships, such as encouraging one another to perform the prayer. Likewise, when it comes to justifying their choice of wearing the headscarf, they **moralise** their rationale in religious terms as grounds for challenging ethnicised explanations that construct the scarf as a marker of ethnic distinction. As for the non-Malay women, they **legitimise** the tensions brought about by state-sponsored Islamisation from a religious standpoint though this does not necessarily mean that their position is informed by ideological discourses of Islamisation. In a nutshell, Malay women use religious accounts to challenge ethnic hierarchies by employing gendered moral boundaries while non-Malay women activate gendered and religious concerns that inadvertently reinforce these hierarchies.

The broader implication of this is that religion can be used as a framework for promoting inter-culturalism and progressive gender politics. Alongside scholars who have called for the engagement of feminist literatures on intersectionality and religious women's agency (Avishai et. al. 2015; Singh 2015), I argue for a more rigorous interrogation of scholarship that examine these two bodies of works together in the study of inter-ethnic relations. The marginalised position of religion within feminist literature is partly due to the legacies of Western feminism that considered religion a patriarchal institution (Avishai et. al. 2015). Saba Mahmood's (2005) ethnographic study of women's mosque movement in Egypt is an illustration of a critique towards Western feminist thought, which she contends, has been unable to consider the various forms of agency performed by women who live their lives in accordance with traditional Islamic virtues. She asserts that practices that conform to traditional religious norms do not necessarily represent mindless submission to oppressive structures, and not all human experiences can be mapped neatly onto the framework of resistance and oppression. As she argues, "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (Mahmood 2005:15). Avishai's (2008) concept of 'doing religion', which explains that agency can be experienced through religious subjects' construction of religiosity, is similar to Mahmood's in that both authors define religion as a mode of conduct and being. This perspective is indebted to a tradition in cultural sociology that conceives religion as a dynamic cultural repertoire or what

Swidler (1986) terms as a tool kit, an approach that does not determine action but creates possibilities for strategies of action that would guide and influence behaviours. Thus, instead of conflating women's agency with resistance, both authors seek to theorise other forms of agency that would shape women's lives meaningfully, those that are neither necessarily oppositional nor autonomous. My research builds up on these works by extending the inquiry to include how religious subjects' appropriation of religion is embodied not just within their respective religious traditions, but in relation to other religious subjects in the multi-ethnic society that they are embedded in.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

This dissertation has set out to study the attitudes of young people in Malaysia towards inter-ethnic relations in the contemporary political order of the country based on their engagement with local films with inter-ethnic content. Two films have been used as common points of discussion; '*Gadoh*' and '*Sepet*'. Although the definition of an 'inter-ethnic film' is open to contestation, the fact that the characters and issues in the films are representative of the major ethnic communities in Malaysia, and run through their narratives, render these two films fitting to an inquiry about inter-ethnic relations in the country. This is unlike other local films where ethnic issues are only addressed fleetingly. This study extends previous research on sociology of films by capturing the value of intersectionality in examining audience consumption of films through a sociological perspective. Unlike previous studies, it avoids the presumed priority of a social identity as the most central determinant of the respondents' identities. Instead, it shows how ethnicity, religion, class and gender are mutually constitutive in reproducing, maintaining and challenging hegemonic understandings of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia.

In this chapter, I will turn to the most wide-ranging conclusions of the dissertation that have linked inter-ethnic ideologies in Malaysian films with the ways in which young people in Malaysia have engaged with them in relation to their everyday lived experience (Section 7.2). What is at stake here is an attempt to interrogate the implications of the respondents' narratives for understanding inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia from the perspectives of its youth, and the processes of intersectionality more broadly (Section 7.3). Last but not least, I will identify several potential but not exhaustive areas of research on audience reception of inter-ethnic films made in Malaysia, and sociology of films in general (Section 7.4).

7.2 Summary of Major Findings

The objective of the research was to interrogate the collective responses of young people in Malaysia rather than a disconnected group of viewers who rely solely on personal aesthetic judgements. It sought to theorise how their interpretations of the films illuminate their lived multi-ethnic experience and attitudes towards inter-ethnic relations. The findings show that while the undergraduates have engaged in the reproduction of essentialised ethnic identities in Malaysia, majority of them went to great lengths to challenge simplistic representations of ethnic issues that are based on these static categories. Such interpretations are complex and multidimensional; interwoven with their ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, social statuses and gender orientations. Hence, in addressing the first research question, which is, in what ways do the intersectional subjectivities of Malaysian undergraduates shape their interpretations of inter-ethnic politics in Malaysian films, I have argued that each of these social identities by itself does not bear any significant meaning to the students' filmic interpretations. Rather, it is the intersections of these identities with the students' ethnic backgrounds that have informed their contestation as well as affirmation of the ethnic ordering of the nation-state.

Chapter 4 examines the possibilities of ethnic and religious identities to be intertwined in the respondents' narratives. It explores how the respondents negotiate understandings of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in Malaysia based on their interpretations of the films. In linking ethnicity and religion, scholars tend to emphasise the value of one identity over another. Contrary to these studies, I have

shown that it is important to treat the two social identities as constitutive of each other at the micro-level of everyday interactions rather than prioritising one identity marker over another. The findings demonstrate that while the respondents' articulations of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations are strongly divided along their religious backgrounds, they reflect the capacity for the advancement of cross-cultural dialogue among youth. Instead of viewing religion as a barrier that would hinder the formation of positive inter-ethnic relations, respondents across all religious affiliations appropriate it to negotiate existing tensions brought about by their lived environment. These negotiations do not necessarily carry alternative meanings to existing notions of inter-ethnic relations, but reflect a process of accommodation on the part of the respondents.

Chapter 5 sets out to explore the extent to which the respondents' socio-economic backgrounds shape their interpretations of inter-ethnic relations in films. It demonstrates that the respondents' filmic interpretations are fraught in a position of ambivalence that simultaneously denies and affirms the ethnic segregation in Malaysia's society. This sense of ambivalence is clearly expressed by minority groups from high-income and working-class backgrounds. Among those from high-income background, the ambivalence rests between an acknowledgement of a system that is segregated along ethnic lines, and the motivation to uplift the images of their ethnic communities by denying the political and economic marginalisation that the system has caused to their communities. Likewise, for those from working class origins, the desire to counter the state's unjust policies oscillates with a desire for ethnic recognition, which is conveyed through their assimilation into the state's model of multi-ethnicity that ensures the maintenance of ethnicised borders. Coupled with attempts to narrate a rosy picture of multi-ethnicity in Malaysia to an international researcher interested in exploring the ethnic dynamics in their country, the respondents have ended up sweeping certain critical ethnic issues under the rug. On the contrary, the Malay respondents from all income groups, and those who hail from middle class backgrounds across all ethnicities demonstrated attempts at foregrounding ethnic issues. However, instead of pointing to the structural flaws of social systems that discriminate against citizens along the lines of ethnicity, their narratives reflect concerns that do not transcend communal interests, thus validating a structurally ethnicised system in the process.

Chapter 6 illuminates the ways in which the structures of ethnicity, religion and gender intersect in the lives of Malay and non-Malay women, and how they negotiate these structures in their interpretations of the films. The Malay female respondents affirm the positive depictions of the relations between Malay women and non-Malay men in films by adopting an inter-cultural lens to bridge religious differences, and in so doing show how the gender gap can be reduced as well through their multi-ethnic encounters. Unlike the Malay females, the non-Malay women reinforce ethnic and gender hierarchies through expressing religious concerns, thereby validating the inter-ethnic tensions in films like '*Gadoh*' and '*Antara Cinta dan Bangsa*'. However, these concerns are generally unfounded and based on their preconceived notions of other ethnicities. It should be noted that this chapter does not take into account the views of the male respondents, including Malay men who did interject every now and then during the group interviews to challenge negative stereotypes of them, including their "polygamous" behaviour. Whether or not the latter's narratives have improved the non-Malay females' perceptions of Malay men is beyond the scope of this dissertation, and would require further research. Nonetheless, it is safe to assume at this stage that the space provided by the filmic discussions have offered alternative views of Malay men to non-Malay respondents, reiterating the possibility of films as a tool to engage youth in mature conversations about ethnicity, religion and gender.

My second research question asked: How do the undergraduates negotiate the structural impacts of state-led Islamisation projects on their lived multi-ethnic experience? To answer this question, I have contextualised the study within the backdrop of the increasing trend of Islamisation in Malaysia. I have contended that while the state rhetoric of Islamisation informs the undergraduates' articulations of ethnicised narratives to a certain extent, it is important not to adopt a homogenising view of the impacts of Islamisation on inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. This is because a comprehensive understanding of Islamisation requires not just an examination of state-led initiatives or bottom-up societal approaches, but of the dynamic interaction between macro and micro processes.

Chapter 4 demonstrates that the multi-ethnic experience of young people in Malaysia need not necessarily be dictated by the state rhetoric of Islamisation. Although

Islamisation may have fostered an environment of high inter-ethnic tension, it does not account for all of the non-Muslims' hostility towards the institutionalisation of Islam in Malaysia. The Muslim respondents have also shown that the way in which they understand and practise Islam in Malaysia marks a departure from the state's grand narratives of the religion. Instead of adopting a notion of Islam that is politicised, they internalise religious teachings that promote harmonious inter-ethnic relations. Through their discussion of the films, both the Malay and non-Malay repondents have taken the celebration of ethnic harmony to another level by pushing the limits of cross-cultural dialogue on issues that have been socially constructed as taboo to clarify their doubts about the religious beliefs and practices of other ethnicities.

Chapter 5 goes on to show that while respondents of high and low income backgrounds generally challenge state ideologies of Malay supremacy, articulations of ethnicised narratives reinforce the political structures of the Malay elites, which are organised around ethnic affiliations. Furthermore, the data suggest that part of the reason why the Bumiputera policy is still in place is due to the lack of contestation from the ground against the policy. Financial aid schemes that have served ethnic minorities from the lower income groups have masked the flaws of the system. In addition, the respondents themselves are acceptive of their financial conditions and refuse to complicate the Bumiputera issue in the name of ethnic harmony.

Chapter 6 reiterates the importance of critically analysing the dialectical relationship between the macro structures of the state and the micro processes of appropriating the Islamisation discourse. Contrary to studies that have attributed ethnic tensions in Malaysia to ideological causes, this research has shown that negotiations of inter-ethnic relations involve more than just examining how the state-sponsored Islamisation project impacts upon the citizens' attitudes and beliefs towards other ethnicities. Rather, it attends to how the structural context of Islamisation generates different understandings of other ethnicities among Malaysian youth that may not be in congruent with the state's agenda. For instance, contrary to mainstream media reports that often detail the hostile relations between Malays and Chinese, the Malay women's responses show that the positive friendships that they form with non-Malay men are not necessarily influenced by broader socio-political processes. On the other

hand, the stereotypical views of non-Malay women from West Malaysia towards Malay women, coupled with their reductionist conceptions of the latter, does not immediately imply the ideological impacts of Islamisation on these young people. Instead, it is the conformity to fixated ideas about other ethnicities, which are often antagonistic, that truly gives form to ethnicised structures in Malaysia.

The three empirical chapters collectively present attempts by young and educated Malaysians to negotiate their understandings of multi-ethnic and inter-ethnic relations vis-à-vis their interpretations of locally made inter-ethnic films. Overall, the findings have shown that internal divisions within the same social category have caused greater social tensions than inter-ethnic differences. These can be illustrated in the intra-ethnic inequalities among Malays of different social classes, and among those from the Bumiputera group. They are also embodied in the tensions between Malay women and non-Malay women. However, this does not mean that inter-ethnic tensions do not exist. For all the respondents' expressions of interest in multi-ethinicty on screen, ethnic stereotypes still persist. Furthermore, positionality cannot be dissociated from the process of interpretation. Being educated informants who are aware of my background as a researcher and the broader implications of my research, many of my respondents have chosen not to problematise ethnic issues out of concerns of casting their country in a negative light to an outsider. However, traces of inter-ethnic tensions became evident when they began to articulate their position on inter-ethnic relations on a more personal level, such as their attitude towards inter-ethnic marriage and issues that affect their day-to-day lived experience, which include threats to places of worship. Hence, I argue that while educated youth in Malaysia are striving towards improving the inter-ethnic tensions in the country, it is still an incomplete process.

The findings have also revealed that the undergraduates mainly read the films in opposition to the hegemonic messages that are often conveyed in mainstream films. However, this interpretive dualism of resistance/acceptance of filmic messages rests alongside a plethora of factors individual viewers testify to in relation to the films. These factors often involve the intersectionality of social subjectivities, which implies that the respondents may not subscribe to identical positions when interpreting scenes of different themes. Nonetheless, it is this very multiple intersections of variables that

I hope to contribute to studies on audience reception through this dissertation, which has recognised that the individual spectator is a complex construction of ethnicised, classed and gendered subjectivities. Through the film screening exercise and focus group discussions, I have drawn a collective response towards the films, which reveals that the respondents' ethnic backgrounds continue to be a salient social determinant that influence their filmic interpretations. I posit that more attention should be directed towards the micro-level process of interaction so that a more bottom-up approach of how lay audiences interpret ethnicity and inter-ethnic representations in films can be illuminated. The next and final section of the dissertation will reaffirm how the activities have coalesced the respondents into a community of meaning-makers whose insights bear important implications for the future of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia.

7.3 Broader Implications of Study

Overall, this dissertation makes significant theoretical and empirical contributions to a sociological study of ethnic representations and audience reception of inter-ethnic films. Media researchers commonly employ textual analyses to examine the social and political discourses surrounding the content as well as production of films. My work ventures beyond that approach to demonstrate how actual audiences in Malaysia both reinforce and contest the logic of ethnicisation in the country by making associations between the films and their everyday lives. In this regard, I posit that Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory is limited because regardless of the interpretive positions adopted, they are always articulated in relation to the dominant ideological system. This theory does not only suggest a static way of reading the text but fails to capture the multiplicity of taken-for-granted meanings that the audience can make beyond the inherent properties contained in the text itself. The findings go on to prove the salience of the everyday context by showing how the entrenchment of ethnicity in the respondents' *real* life is manifested in their interpretations of the *reel* life.

Yet, the data have shown that the respondents' narratives serve a plethora of social purposes that go beyond understandings of their lived experience. They enable the youth to negotiate hegemonic constructs of ethnicity, religious, class and gender identities. They draw on representations of these identities in films to form a collective identity and imbue them with meanings. The findings prove to be significant, as they show that certain common understandings of ethnicity in Malaysia, be it as portrayed on the wide screen or by the mainstream media, cannot be confirmed. The assumption that oppositional reading of films is synonymous with resistance towards hegemonic filmic representations, as proposed by Stuart Hall, cannot be sustained. As the research has shown, it is important to unravel different kinds of meanings formed from the interpretive activities before concluding that the respondents are necessarily resistant to the hegemonic messages found in the films. At times, they would even accept the existing ethnic order in the spirit of nationalism. For example, although it is widely understood in academic literature that the low-income ethnic minorities in Malaysia are marginalised communities, they may not be agreeable to the foregrounding of their disadvantaged position in indie films, as exemplified by the ethnic Indians and Chinese when interpreting the Bumiputera policy in films like '*Sepet*' and '*Gadoh*'. At other times, they draw attention to everyday life examples that have been overlooked by the films. A case in point would be the financial struggles faced by the low-income and some middle-income Malays, as well as non-Malay members of the Bumiputera group, highlighting the intra-ethnic inequalities that are not depicted in the films in their quest for underscoring class disparity between the different ethnicities.

What this means for research that adopts intersectionality as its conceptual framework is that when systems of interactive processes are considered, it is important to avoid giving primacy to a particular group with the assumption that it deserves a "voice" in the research. While I am not suggesting that researchers should ignore this noble aim in their research, placing marginalised groups at the centre of the research runs the risk of assuming that stratification processes occur hierarchically based on normative understandings of power relations. Power should instead be viewed as relational, and that the different social variables intersect at various points of interactions. Within the context of Malaysia, this entails the need to avoid associating certan forms of inequalities with specific ethnic or gender communities at the outset of research.

Rather, researchers should look for processes that are fully interactive. As Hae and Ferree (2010:146) aptly articulates, "A research project that compares main effects and interactions as processes in a particular setting might examine how interactions appear for the dominant as well as for the subordinate groups and what assumptions about the hierarchical relationship among these processes are being made."

More broadly, the data also bear important implications for the future of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. They indicate a departure from scholarly works that suggest a blanket application of the concept of cosmopolitanism to multiculturalism in Malaysia without considering the complexities of its lived realities (Khoo 2009b; Khoo 2014). Cosmopolitanism in this context refers to Yasmin Ahmad's notion of cosmopolitanism, which posits that a sense of shared humanity can be achieved through common values and respect of cultural difference that transcend ethnic and national loyalties (Khoo 2009a). While this approach in itself is not in any way problematic, Yasmin's deconstruction of hegemonic Malay subjectivity through cosmopolitan references is too idealistic, as it glosses over real ethnic and religious divisions that continue to underpin Malaysian society, and runs the risk of silencing discussions about ethnic differences and inequalities.

My findings have revealed that far from self-identifying themselves with the concept of cosmopolitanism, and in spite of the government rhetoric of '1Malaysia' and parallel public campaigns that ostensibly call upon Malaysians to rise above the ethnic paradigm, ethnicity remains a significant identifier to my interviewees' conception of themselves and of others. Their articulations of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations highlight an expression of a *localised* form of cosmopolitanism that identify more closely with what Yao (2003) terms as "national cosmopolitanism". As Yao (2003:222) argues, "Those who embody this kind of cosmopolitanism do not necessarily look longingly towards the broadening horizon of the universal, but applies squarely to the local." In other words, cosmopolitan sentiments can exist without having to transcend national borders, as it can also involve negotiations with inter-ethnic concerns *within* the nation-state, as exemplified by my respondents. As young Malaysians are still grappling with the notions of religion and ethnicity while at the same time nurturing hope for a more unified Malaysia, this concept of national

cosmopolitanism would be more relevant to an inquiry of inter-ethnic relations in the country.

7.4 Study Limitations and Future Research Agenda

This dissertation has set out to explore the subjective experiences of undergraduates in Malaysia. As such, it only works on a small sample size in an attempt to conduct an in-depth analysis of their attitudes. I acknowledge that a greater sample size is needed if the aim of the research is to generalise the findings to broader patterns of audience reception of inter-ethnic films in the country. Moreover, the primary focus of the research has been on the Malays, Chinese, Indians and non-Malay Bumiputeras given that these are the most widely represented categories of ethnicities in public discourses. Future research can take into account the ways in which those who do not fall neatly into any of these categories, such as citizens of mixed ethnic parentage, engage with the existing ethnic ideology in Malaysia. Furthermore, in the course of conducting this research, I recognise that attempts to consider the links between filmic representations, audiences and material contexts in a study of audience reception of films pose certain challenges of space and emphasis. The need to explore, with adequate respect, various aspects of viewers' response and lived experience has to be balanced against the practicability of including information on ethnic politics. In view of this, several interesting lines of research would deepen the analysis of the study.

One way to enrich the research is to conduct an expanded study that further investigates how young people from different interpretive contexts in Malaysia engage with inter-ethnic politics in locally made films. A comparison between the interpretations of viewers from urban and rural areas would be immensely instructive in contributing to an understanding of how class differentials and structural inequalities emerging from different spatial contexts affect young people's attitudes towards ethnicity and racism. As an extension of this study, it would also be insightful to compare the attitudes of young people from different types of tertiary institutions towards the same inter-ethnic content featured in the same films. For example, further research may involve carrying out extended fieldwork in universities in Malaysia that are dominated by a single ethnic group, such as UiTM Shah Alam that only enrols Malay students, or Sunway University that is dominated by ethnic Chinese students.

Alternatively, I can also interview students from institutions that largely offer Islamic studies courses, such as International Islamic University Malaysia to find out if they would hold different views from students of multi-ethnic universities.

The second area of research should aim towards engaging with a variety of films that are wider ranging than those used in my current study. The films discussed by my respondents are mainly feature films of the drama genre. Other films in the filmography were not shown to the respondents due to the limited space and time afforded by this dissertation. Thus, the only source of insights on these films was from those students who have watched them before. As such, further research can delve into the possibilities of audience engagement with films that range from romantic comedy to documentary films. Specifically, it needs to explore the reasons certain genres are more popular than others and whether or not this would reflect on the audiences' position on how inter-ethnic relations should be represented and discussed in public.

Finally, my dissertation has also laid the foundations for further research on how intersectionality can be used more widely within the discipline of Sociology to inform understandings of micro-level processes of interactions across different ethnicities, and how they relate to institutionalised processes at the macro level. Although intersectionality is the brainchild of feminist theory, its insights can also be deployed in areas of study beyond sociology of gender, including the field of sociology of media. One line of future research can explore the ways in which power relations operate through particular spaces of media production and consumption to influence processes of subject formation. In so doing, it would shape studies on how Sociology can contribute to the ways in which intersectionality can be researched in practice using media as tools of inquiry.

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Appendix A. Filmography

No.	Title	Year of Production	Director/ Producer/ Production Company	Duration	Main Language/s
1.	*Bahaya Cinta* (Dangerous Love)	2014	Yusof Kelana/ YKS Film Maker, Sheunik Sdn Bhd, Redbridge TV & Film Production	120 mins	Malay/ Vietnamese
2.	The Journey	2014	Chiu Keng Guan/ Choo Chi Han/ Wohoo Studios	110 mins	English/ Mandarin
3.	*Tanda Putera* (The Hallmark of a Prince)	2013	Shuhaimi Baba/ Pesona Pictures	115 mins	Malay/ English
4.	Indian Story: Hindus and Muslims	2012	EngageMedia/ Free Malaysia Today	4 mins	Tamil
5.	Bangsa Malaysia Compilation: *Antara Cinta dan Bangsa* (Torn between Love and the Nation)	2012	Grace Tan/ Pusat Komas	5 mins	Malay/ English/ Mandarin
6.	*29 Februari* (29 February)	2012	Edry Abdul Halim/ KRU Studios	100 mins	Malay/ Cantonese
7.	*Nasi Lemak* 2.0 (Coconut Rice 2.0)	2011	Wee Meng Chee/ Prodigee Media Sdn Bhd	110 mins	Mandarin/ Cantonese/ Hokkien/ English
8.	The Joshua Tapes	2010	Benji Lim/ Befour Film and Perantauan Pictures	90 mins	English
9.	*Estet* (Estate)	2010	Mamat Khalid/ Naga VXS	100 mins	Malay
10.	The Son	2009	Desmond Ang/ 15 Malaysia	3 mins	Cantonese/ Malay
11.	*Gadoh* (Fight)	2009	Brenda Danker and Namron/ Pusat Komas	75 mins	Malay/ Mandarin
12.	Chocolate	2009	Yasmin Ahmad/ 15 Malaysia	3 mins	Malay/ Mandarin
13.	Talentime	2009	Yasmin Ahmad/ Ahmad Puad Onah	120 mins	English/ Tamil/ Malay
14.	*Muallaf* (The Convert)	2008	Yasmin Ahmad/ MHz Film	80 mins	English/ Malay
15.	*10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (10	2006	Fahmi Reza/ EngageMedia	35 mins	English/ Malay

	Years Before Independence)				
16.	The Last Communist	2006	Amir Muhammad/ You Tube	90 mins	English/ Malay/ Hokkien
17.	*Jom Gi Minum* (Let's Go for a Drink)	2006	Seven Doraisamy/ Pusat Komas	7 mins	Malay/ Tamil
18.	My New Home	2006	Amy Lim/ Mien Low	11 mins	Malay/ Mandarin
19.	*Ada Apa Dengan Cina?* (What's Up with Chinese People?)	2005	Chi Too/ Pusat Komas	13 mins	Mandarin/ Tamil
20.	*Sembilu* 2005 (Hurt in 2005)	2005	Yusof Haslam/ Skop Productions Sdn Bhd	120 mins	Malay
21.	*Gubra* (Anxiety)	2005	Yasmin Ahmad/ Chilli Pepper Film Production and Nusan Bakti Corporation	110 mins	English/ Malay/ Cantonese/ Mandarin
22.	*Sepet* (Slit-eyed)	2004	Yasmin Ahmad/ MHz Film	100 mins	English/ Malay/ Cantonese/ Mandarin
23.	The Big Durian	2003	Amir Muhammad/ Doghouse 73 Pictures	75 mins	English/ Malay/ Mandarin
24.	Paloh	2003	Adman Salleh/ FINAS	110 mins	Malay/ Mandarin/ Cantonese
25.	Embun	2002	Erma Fatima/ FINAS	130 mins	Malay
26.	Spinning *Gasing* (Spinning Top)	2001	Teck Tan/ Niche Film and Spinning Gasing Films	90 mins	English/ Malay/ Cantonese
27.	*Gerimis* (Drizzle)	1968	P.Ramlee/ Merdeka Film Productions	100 mins	Malay/ Tamil

Appendix B. Numbers and Percentage of Respondents Who Have Watched Inter-Ethnic Films

No.	Title	Year of Production	Director/ Producer/ Production Company	Duration	Main Language/s	Number of participants who have watched the film before	Percentage of participants who have watched the film before*
1.	*Bahaya Cinta* (Dangerous Love)	2014	Yusof Kelana/ YKS Film Maker, Sheunik Sdn Bhd, Redbridge TV & Film Production	120 mins	Malay/ Vietnamese	0	0%
2.	The Journey	2014	Chiu Keng Guan/ Choo Chi Han/ Wohoo Studios	110 mins	English/ Mandarin	29	30%
3.	*Tanda Putera* (The Hallmark of a Prince)	2013	Shuhaimi Baba/ Pesona Pictures	115 mins	Malay/ English	24	25%
4.	Indian Story: Hindus and Muslims	2012	EngageMedia / Free Malaysia Today	4 mins	Tamil	0	0%
5.	Bangsa Malaysia Compilation : *Antara Cinta dan Bangsa* (Torn between Love and the Nation)	2012	Grace Tan/ Pusat Komas	5 mins	Malay/ English/ Mandarin	2	2%
6.	29 *Februari* (29 February)	2012	Edry Abdul Halim/ KRU Studios	100 mins	Malay/ Cantonese	17	18%
7.	*Nasi Lemak* 2.0 (Coconut Rice 2.0)	2011	Wee Meng Chee/ Prodigee Media Sdn Bhd	110 mins	Mandarin/ Cantonese / Hokkien/ English	31	32%
8.	The Joshua Tapes	2010	Benji Lim/ Befour Film and Perantauan Pictures	90 mins	English	0	0%
9.	*Estet* (Estate)	2010	Mamat Khalid/ Naga VXS	100 mins	Malay	26	27%
10.	The Son	2009	Desmond Ang/ 15	3 mins	Cantonese / Malay	2	2%

			Malaysia				
11.	*Gadoh* (Fight)	2009	Brenda Danker and Namron/ Pusat Komas	75 mins	Malay/ Mandarin	16	17%
12.	Chocolate	2009	Yasmin Ahmad/ 15 Malaysia	3 mins	Malay/ Mandarin	3	3%
13.	Talentime	2009	Yasmin Ahmad/ Ahmad Puad Onah	120 mins	English/ Tamil/ Malay	22	23%
14.	*Muallaf* (The Convert)	2008	Yasmin Ahmad/ MHz Film	80 mins	English/ Malay	40	42%
15.	10 *Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (10 Years Before Independence)	2006	Fahmi Reza/ EngageMedia	35 mins	English/ Malay	4	4%
16.	The Last Communist	2006	Amir Muhammad/ You Tube	90 mins	English/ Malay/ Hokkien	4	4%
17.	*Jom Gi Minum* (Let's Go for a Drink)	2006	Seven Doraisamy/ Pusat Komas	7 mins	Malay/ Tamil	12	13%
18.	My New Home	2006	Amy Lim/ Mien Low	11 mins	Malay/ Mandarin	0	0%
19.	*Ada Apa Dengan Cina?* (What's Up with Chinese People?)	2005	Chi Too/ Pusat Komas	13 mins	Mandarin/ Tamil	3	3%
20.	*Sembilu* 2005 (Hurt in 2005)	2005	Yusof Haslam/ Skop Productions Sdn Bhd	120 mins	Malay	36	38%
21.	*Gubra* (Anxiety)	2005	Yasmin Ahmad/ Chilli Pepper Film Production and Nusan Bakti Corporation	110 mins	English/ Malay/ Cantonese / Mandarin	32	33%
22.	*Sepet* (Slit-eyed)	2004	Yasmin Ahmad/ MHz Film	100 mins	English/ Malay/ Cantonese / Mandarin	54	56%
23.	The Big Durian	2003	Amir Muhammad/ Doghouse 73 Pictures	75 mins	English/ Malay/ Mandarin	0	0%
24.	Paloh	2003	Adman Salleh/	110 mins	Malay/ Mandarin/	5	5%

			FINAS		Cantonese		
25.	Embun	2002	Erma Fatima/ FINAS	130 mins	Malay	45	47%
26.	Spinning *Gasing* (Spinning Top)	2001	Teck Tan/ Niche Film and Spinning Gasing Films	90 mins	English/ Malay/ Cantonese	4	4%
27.	*Gerimis* (Drizzle)	1968	P.Ramlee/ Merdeka Film Productions	100 mins	Malay/ Tamil	0	0%

*Figures are rounded off to the nearest whole number