ENGAGING WITH MODERNITY: MALAY WOMEN, NON-WESTERN SOAP OPERA AND WATCHING COMPETENCIES

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Md Azalanshah Md Syed

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“In a different field, different crickets sing,
In a different pool, different fishes swim”

Melbourne, January 2011

Md Azalanshah Md Syed
I dedicate this thesis to my mother and her afternoon soaps, with never-ending love and thanks.
Abstract

Non-Western soap operas have been promoted by the Malaysian authorities as providing appropriate forms of modernity with culturally proximate values for audiences in Malaysia to emulate. The popularity of non-Western soap opera, however, has not been without its critics. Some have argued that non-Western soap operas corrode the standards of Malay womanhood, compromise cultural boundaries and undermine the state’s vision of Malaysian modernity. Malay women, however, are by no means naïve and unthinking viewers who passively consume these cultural texts. Rather they are more rightly seen as fluid consumers who engage with the consumption process as discerning viewers with sophisticated ‘watching competencies’ to deal with the content of these soap operas in subtle and complex ways. The field of soap opera consumption, defined by Malay women’s fluid engagement with global cultural influences on one hand, and the Malaysian state’s prescription of behaviour for its vision of a modern nation on the other, reveals something crucial about the continually renegotiated nature of the Malaysian modernity.
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PART I: NON-WESTERN SOAP OPERAS, MALAY WOMEN AND MODERNITY

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about Malay women and their engagement with modernity. There are many cultural sites through which Malay women can engage with an increasingly globally oriented modernity in Malaysia. One of the most important of these sites in contemporary Malaysia is non-Western soap operas or ‘soaps’. Extremely popular among Malay women, non-Western soaps from countries such as Korea, Japan, Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan and Thailand supply a rich and diverse cultural repertoire of images and discourses that inform popular conceptions of modernity for Malay audiences. They are an easily accessible platform through which Malay women can imagine forms of transnational modernity in a world of powerful cultural flows unconstrained by the borders of the nation-state.

Due to the immense popularity of these soaps among local audiences, a public anxiety has also emerged over the exposure of women to the images and ideas portrayed in these foreign soaps. Certain public discourses have condemned these soaps for compromising the integrity of Malay cultural life by imparting values that are contrary to Islamic and traditional Malay teachings. These soaps have also been labelled a frivolous waste of time for leading Malay women to ignore their duties in the private and public sphere. The authorities also fear that non-Western soap operas with their images of transnational modernity from these foreign locales will erode the bonds of local culture, identity and values that define Malay womanhood. The detrimental effect of these soaps is even seen as having the
potential to corrode the role of women within the state’s vision of modernity for the nation and the role of female citizens within that plan.

Globalisation has introduced complex cultural interconnections between diverse locations. It has been argued that ‘places are no longer the clear supports of our identity’ (Morley and Robins 1995: 87). Now, sites other than the nation can profoundly influence the formation of identity. In his seminal work *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai (1996) argues that electronic media is the prime vehicle governing, shaping, and modifying popular imagination in contemporary life. In his words, ‘the electronic media decisively change the wider field of mass media and other traditional media. Such media transforms the field of mass mediation because they offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds’ (Appadurai 1996: 3). Given this scenario, electronic media, especially television, has emerged as a ubiquitous and influential technological site channelling discourses that can shape the identities of people in diverse locations. This potential of media like television to play a crucial role in the construction of social identity has prompted authorities in Malaysia to argue that non-Western soaps will incite Malay women to transgress bonds of local culture and identity, which will then jeopardise the state’s vision of Malaysian modernity (Bernama 2006a; 2006b; 2007a; 2007b). The state seeks to open local audiences to a wider world of modernity and mobility, while at the same time stemming any threat that will dilute Malay cultural identity. Thus, the debate over soap operas has emerged as an important site for exploring the issue of how Malay women engage with modernity.

My thesis explores this relationship between a group of Malay women as audiences and non-Western soap operas to assess the validity of this anxiety about
the vulnerability of Malay women to the perceived degeneracy of transnational culture. It also focuses on how these Malay women continually negotiate and renegotiate the nature of Malaysian modernity between the framework of Malay culture and Islamic values and the global consumerist modernity mediated through these soap operas. How do Malay women adhere to the state’s vision of modernity for Malaysia as they consume images of modern middle class life from global locales?

Contrary to the charge made by the authorities, I argue that Malay women in this research are not passive consumers of non-Western soaps. Rather, they are adept consumers who mobilise sophisticated viewing tactics to deal with the content of these soap operas in complex ways. I argue that Malay women employ an array of such tactics that I call ‘watching competencies’ to negotiate the cultural content of transnational modernity presented in these soaps. While this argument is premised on a process of active interpretation of these media texts and mobilisation of viewing tactics, it should be noted that Malay women do not employ their soap-viewing activities as a site of overt resistance against the hegemonic patriarchal state structure. Malay women are aware of their marginalised status in the Malay cultural order, but largely accept this officially sanctioned place in society. Through this argument of ‘watching competencies’, I seek to highlight that the notion that Malay women audiences cannot be slotted into definitive categories of resistive or submissive. They do not submit completely to the paternalistic attitude nor rebel against sanctions put in place by a patriarchal Malay cultural order. Instead, they tread a path of negotiation, where they invoke their own interpretations of cultural ideologies of the Malay world to mobilise watching competencies through which they watch such soaps while maintaining their adherence to adat\(^1\), Islam and cultural expectations of the Malay community.
This site of engaging with modernity through non-Western soaps is marked by the contest between those group of Malay women’s fluid engagement with the global content on one hand and the Malaysian state’s prescription of a certain code of behaviour for its vision of a modern nation on the other. It also reveals something crucial about the hybrid or continually renegotiated nature of modernity evolving in a non-Western postcolonial nation like Malaysia. My examination of this cultural phenomenon also intersects with a broader debate about the emergence of a form of ‘alternative modernity’ in Malaysia. The state seeks to create an indigenised version of modernity which is sensitive to local cultural norms and is different from hegemonic models of Western modernity. In this scheme of things, the conflict over these Malay women’s preference for these foreign soaps represents a crucial example of the process of negotiating a path through modernity while maintaining the equilibrium of the status quo and the rate of change. This is the central focus of my thesis.

The double-edged knife of modernity: Anxiety about non-Western soap operas

In the earliest phase of television broadcasting in Malaysia (during the 1960s and 70s), Western soaps were reported as being the most popular programs among local audiences (Karthigesu 1994). This trend continued after the privatisation of the Malaysian television industry in the early 1980s. Many Western soaps particularly those from America such as Dallas, Dynasty, Baywatch, and Beverly Hills 90210, were the most popular programs (Karthigesu 1991; 1994a; 1998). However, the images of modernity in these American soaps, with their emphases on consumerism, materialistic lifestyles and sexuality, were criticised by the local authorities as a threat to Malay cultural life. Therefore, from early 1980s onwards,
non-Western soap operas were promoted by the local authorities to counter the perceived negative influences of American popular culture and to promote images of modernity from culturally proximate non-Western locales (Wahab 2006).

At the time of introduction of these non-Western soaps on local television channels, local authorities advocated the suitability of these non-Western soaps for Malay audiences on many grounds. Programs from Korea, Indonesia and even Latin America were seen as propagating cultural values similar to the Malay way of life (Bernama 2007b; Nordin 2003; Suh, Kwon and Choi 2007). Of course, given the diversity of locales they come from, the content of these non-Western soaps also varied significantly. One defining feature of the genre of non-Western soaps however, as seen by Malaysian authorities is the representation of an alternative modernity. These non-Western soaps were seen as presenting images of capitalist modernity tempered with culturally proximate values that lay emphasis on traditional social structures, family and communal values. The authorities argued that advanced economies like Japan and Korea could provide images of appropriate work ethics and economic behaviour for audiences in Malaysia to emulate. Cultural content from non-Western locales, even those from the Latin American region, were also encouraged because they were seen as inhabiting the same phase of capitalist development and modernity.

Why does the state display such anxiety and feel the need to govern a somewhat trivial aspect of national life like popular culture? With the emergence of urbanisation, consumer culture and a middle class, concerns have been voiced in the Malaysian public sphere that the Malaysian nation must build its own version of modernity tailored to its needs. With the institutionalisation of Malay dominance, a newly formed group of elite and middle class Malays began to
dictate the course of modernity in the state at the early of 1980s. The National Economic Policy (NEP), Look East Policy, Islamisation policy, Asian Values and the recent Islam Hadhari discourse — which will be elaborated later in chapter two of this thesis, guided their plans for modernisation.

Although modernity and modernisation are deeply interrelated notions, I should differentiate between the two concepts. Modernisation is about the transformation process, which comes about through a highly involved relationship between the political structure and the economy. Anthony Giddens states that the institutional dimension of modernity consists of developing a capitalist economy powered by industrialisation, the formation of nation-state, military power and the practice of surveillance (Giddens 1990: 71). Barker suggests that the process through which all these elements emerge, coalesce and mobilise social activity can be called modernisation (Barker 2000: 134). On the other hand, modernity can be defined as the cultural change that accompanies these processes of modernisation of economy and politics.

The class of the newly educated, middle class Malays who were spearheading the modernisation process in the country also shaped the cultural dimension of modernity that the nation was striving for. This group was active in the wave of Islamic resurgence that led to the Islamisation of the nation in the 1970s (Shamsul 1997). Thus, Islamic revivalism has emerged as the moral cornerstone in any debate about modernity in Malaysia. Later in the 1990s, the debate about Asian Values circulated a discourse promoting essentialised attributes of Asian societies, which were lauded as the key to the (East)-Asian economic miracle (Manan 1999).
As is apparent from these public debates that the vision of modernity for Malaysia is not driven by a notion of imitating the West as a role model for a modern future. Far from it, the path to modernity for Malaysia is seen as one where the nation must negotiate and at times circumvent a hegemonic Western modernity. Such strategies of negotiating modernity in non-Western nations have often been called modes of ‘alternative modernity’ (Gaonkar 2001: 15). While there is no doubt that modernity nowadays is everywhere (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995: 2), it is practised and performed in multiple modes as its consequences may not clearly ‘hold in common, a singular conception’ (Gomes 1994: 5). The narrative and version of modernity may vary according to how it is extrapolated within the peculiarities of the specific national/cultural site. In view of these debates, it is appropriate to examine Malaysia as a construction site of alternative modernity and the location of the consumption of non-Western modernity. I will explain the project of Malaysian modernity further in chapter two of this thesis.

The need to control the flow of transnational cultural content is part of this vision of the state to create a version of modernity in Malaysia that will create capitalist development but retain the traditional cultural order. It is the element that has led to this particular debate about non-Western soaps. Non-Western soaps were seen as providing the means of imagining life experiences of a non-Western modernity and a viable alternative to counter the domination of the West. The dominance of non-Western soap operas in Malaysia is not merely the result of an indiscriminate flow of television content determined by market demand for entertainment. It is instead part of a cautiously crafted strategy by the state to shape the cultural dimensions of an unfolding modernity in Malaysia. In this larger socio-political landscape, the debate over soap operas and the viewing habits of Malay women form a part of the state’s advocacy of alternative modernity.
As Islamic resurgence began to underwrite the appropriate space for Malay women in the process of modernisation of the nation (Stivens 2006), this mundane activity of watching soaps also became a fiercely contested site about Islamic morality and womanhood. The consumption of non-Western soaps by Malay women has emerged as an ideologically charged battlefield of larger social concerns about modernity for Malaysia. As a cultural phenomenon, non-Western soaps provide a rich field for examining the tensions and aspirations of the project of alternative modernity which the Malaysian state envisions for its subjects.

**Non-Western soap operas and alternative modernity: Growing criticism of the genre**

Promoted at first as being suitable vehicles for aiding the modernity project in Malaysia, discussions around these non-Western soap operas are now hedged with concerns about the effect of capitalist modernity on Malay cultural life. Although acclaimed for providing an appropriate vehicle of modernity to suit Malay aspirations, there is now increasing ambivalence about the consumption of non-Western soaps by Malay audiences, which has grown over the last decade. At the advent of these soaps on local television, some concerns about the negative effects of these soaps were being voiced in the media, social gatherings and even in the parliament (Karthigesu 1991). According to Kitley (1999), the broadcasting of transnational television programs across Asian countries helps to open up the local public sphere, strengthen cross-cultural dialogue and encourage the circulation of information. Kitley notes, ‘indeed, the public sphere is occupied not only by local actors but also by official and nonofficial voices from beyond the national territory, creating a *transnational* public sphere’ (Kitley 2000: 1). Economic benefits also follow in terms of increase in intra-regional trade in
television programming and services. But he warns that this situation may not be completely ‘harmonious’ whether in terms of the process involved or the resultant outcome (Kitley 1999: 1). Now the issue of non-Western soaps as popular transnational television program in Malaysia has become a constant source of contention in the public sphere, amongst media commentators, social activists and parliamentarians. I should note here that when I refer to the ‘local authorities’, it is meant as a broad term to include the ruling political party especially UMNO², its coalition government and the various social agencies that derive their legitimacy from the government. The ideological and political position of UMNO in maintaining their power and influence in the Malaysian society especially Malay ethnic will be further explained in the chapter two of this thesis.

Some representatives of Wanita UMNO³, the women’s wing of UMNO have recently suggested that Malay women should stop watching non-Western soaps altogether. A spokesperson said, ‘we now see too many Indonesian and Filipino programmes like the drama Bawang Merah Bawang Putih⁴ on television. There’s nothing positive to be gained from these programmes, only negative (sic)’ (Bernama 2006a). Puteri UMNO⁵, another women’s body under the UMNO, urged the government to ‘curb the addiction to soap operas which deviated from the Islamic faith or propagated new ideas to do wrong, practice free sex or damage society’s norms and social fabric (sic)’ (Bernama 2006b).

Apart from cultural impropriety, it is a common complaint that these soaps lure mothers, wives and friends away from their duties and activities in everyday life. The husband of a fan of these soaps, who is colourfully referred to in a newspaper critic as a ‘telenovela widower’, lamented: ‘ ‘no wonder the house is in a mess”
since many housewives dismiss all their housework and bring life at home to a halt when the soaps are on television’ (John, Damis and Chelvi 2003a).

Some have condemned these transnational soaps as compromising Malay cultural life by imparting values that are contrary to Islamic teachings. A Puteri UMNO spokesperson admonished authorities who, ‘slip in a slot or airtime with dramas that go against our culture during the time for Zuhur, Asar and Maghrib prayers⁶’ (Bernama 2006b). A popular Indonesian religious soap, *Mutiara hati*⁷ was criticised harshly because it used Islamic terms such as *mukjizat*⁸ and *Malaikat*⁹ in an incorrect manner (Hashim 2007). Further, while being based on religious themes, these Indonesian soaps often portray characters wearing revealing outfits or behaving in inappropriate ways. This has invited complaints from local religious authorities who see such misrepresentation of Islam as being sacrilegious (Bernama 2006a).

Apart from these misgivings about the erosion of cultural expectations, religious faith and traditional female duty, there are concerns that non-Western soaps present glamorous images of modern life from foreign locales which may lure Malay women to reject the socio-cultural realities of Malay life. The UMNO youth wing¹⁰ representing young male voices alleged that Malay women fans of these soaps are not only compromising their religious faith, cultural values and domestic duties but even deforming the national project of modernity that seeks to create an enlightened middle class. For example, criticising the popularity of the Mexican soap *Rosalinda*, the UMNO youth wing alleged that the soap is against the spirit of *Islam Hadhari*¹¹, an indispensable value of Malaysian modernity. They were quoted as saying:
We screen these programs [non-Western soaps] everyday. I think some items on these soaps are *haram*\(^{12}\) (forbidden by Islam law) and not good for our society. There are negative elements like envy, jealousy, family conflict and promiscuous sexuality. I wonder why such programs are allowed on the national television. I can’t see how these soaps can educate our middle class and help to construct a *Hadhari* nation (sic) (Bernama 2004).

**Non-Western soap operas on a map of global cultural flows**

Why are these non-Western soaps so popular among local Malay audiences?\(^{13}\) In view of the high proportion of women who are dedicated viewers of these soaps spending significant amounts of their time in this activity, non-Western soaps have become ‘a phenomenon we are hard-pressed to explain’ (John, Davis and Chelvi 2003a). It poses an intriguing question about how cultural content from foreign locales like Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Latin America are lapped up by local audiences in Malaysia, to the dismay of local authorities. Many scholars have explained the popularity of these non-Western soaps amongst audiences as being a result of proximity of culture (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Iwabuchi 2002a; 2004a). This notion of cultural proximity explains the consumption of transnational media content as a process of identification with familiar issues and distancing from unpalatable content (Chua 2008; Jirattikorn 2008; Liebes and Katz 1993; Maclachlan and Chua 2004; Wilson 2001). Chua articulates the premise of this argument in these terms:

> Alternating moments of identification and distancing, where and when the on screen characters are ‘like me/us’ or ‘unlike me/us’,
are generated during real time watching. When identification/distancing takes is thus entirely contingent on who is watching and what is being watched…this identification/distancing process is complicated by the audience’s awareness of the foreignness of the programme which raises hurdles to identification and facilitate distancing (Chua 2008: 79-80).

This argument assumes a sense of identification amongst local audiences in Asia with content produced in Asian locations. Elements that are seen as consolidating this sense of identification include similarities of physical appearance and cultural values, as well as the perception that some of these societies inhabit the same phase of emerging modernity. Strong identification predisposes a viewer in one Asian country such as Malaysia to watch television content produced in other Asian countries like Korea and Indonesia (Blume 2006; Iwabuchi 2002a; Setijadi 2005; Suh, Kwon and Choi 2007).

But it seems problematic to assume that Malay women will implicitly identify with images from other non-Western locations, given the significant cultural and social differences between Malaysia and the other countries. For example, how can an argument of cultural proximity explain the popularity of soaps from an East Asian/Confucian society like Korea in an Islamic society like Malaysia? In addition, even if Indonesia and Malaysia may share some attributes of language and religion, the differences between the two nations are equally strong. A further question might be asked in relation to Chua’s assertion that the ‘foreign-ness’ of cultural products is the source of viewing pleasure (Chua 2008: 78). If viewers are attracted by the ‘not like us’ aspect (Chua 2008: 78) why are Malaysian viewers not more attracted by the even more foreign cultural content of Western soaps?
In this thesis, I argue that such a notion of identification or distancing while retaining its usefulness in explaining some scenarios, does not adequately answer the question of how local audiences of Malay women watch these non-Western soaps from multiple foreign locations. The argument of identification/distancing is too simple and unilinear to capture the multiple nuances of the mode of negotiation practiced by audiences in situ. My theory of watching competencies frames the whole spectrum of modes of negotiation.

Although representations of modern life on television are commonly constructed by references to consumer culture and lifestyle from American popular culture, the complexities of global economic connections have made it more difficult to define what modernity means. Modernity, as I will explain later in chapter two, is not only a complex social phenomenon but its representation on television is also more varied and not solely dictated by images of the West anymore. A massive influx of American popular culture to ‘every corner of every hemisphere’ (Schiller 1993: 47) raised fears of US cultural imperialism which could disassociate people ‘from their cultural roots and tradition of solidarity’ (Petras 1993: 139). However, this notion of a monolithic West-based cultural domination was questioned as early as the 1970s in the field of media and communication research (Roach 1997: 3). Many scholars including Tomlinson (1991), Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham (1996), Liebes and Katz (1993), Thussu (2007) and many others noted the weaknesses of the cultural imperialism theory. A number of cross-cultural textual and audience analyses of American television programs have illustrated that some internal and national factors of cultural domination play a very important role in shaping audience reception and interest in different countries. The study undertaken by Liebes and Katz (1993) about cross-cultural readings of the
American soap *Dallas* in Israel and Japan can shed some light on the importance of such internal and national factors of cultural domination. Liebes and Katz found that their respondents in Israel did not passively consume *Dallas* but actively negotiated the text according to their cultural preferences (Liebes and Katz 1993). On the other hand, Liebes, Katz and Sumiko found that *Dallas* failed in Japan due to its incompatibility with the local values and tastes (Liebes, Katz and Sumiko 1993: 132). Pointing to the weaknesses of the cultural imperialism theory, these findings show that the reception of a television genre must be evaluated through the cultural boundaries determined in specific settings. As Tomlinson suggests, ‘we need to examine the way in which media texts are interpreted and how these interpretations may be mediated in different cultural contexts to give us an adequate sense of the cultural’ (Tomlinson 1991: 41).

The recent growth in the volume of global media flows to/from non-Western locations also emphasises the declining efficacy of cultural imperialism theories (Iwabuchi 2002a). Some recent cross-cultural audience research reports that Western popular culture products, particularly from America, have clearly not maintained their hegemony in the face of a plurality of cultural flows. Iwabuchi notes that the popularity of Japanese soaps in the East and Southeast Asian countries signifies such a development of a new landscape of cultural flows. The rise of the Asian Values discourse (which I will explain in the next chapter) has also led to concerted efforts by governments to boost the popular culture industry in Asia and reinvigorate the flow of media texts between Asian countries. As Appadurai puts it, due to the active flow of transnational cultural texts in an increasingly globally connected world of mass media, migration and tourism, ‘the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only
one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscape’ (Appadurai 1996: 31).

The complexity of the network of media flows thus require us to look at many facets that shape this global map. As Manuel Castells argues ‘society is constructed around flows: flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technology, flows of organisational interactions, flows of images, sounds and symbols’ (Castells 2000: 442). Every aspect of social life in the modern world is shaped by such multiple flows of information, goods, images and capital. Appadurai argues that in terms of transnational cultural flows ‘the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models’ (Appadurai 1996: 32). Instead of such a simple dichotomous model of centre/periphery, Roland Robertson (1995: 32) proposes the concept of ‘glocalization’ where the complexities of global economy require media producers to adapt global products to cater to local audiences and reinvent local products according to global trends to make them competitive. Soaps have such an ability to synthesise the local and global in startling ways — whether in terms of local soaps that imitate a global format or cultural after-effects of consumption of global products in local ways. The popularity of Japanese cultural products within and outside Japan provides a good example of the various dynamics at work in this process of glocalisation. According to Iwabuchi:

The increasing flow of Japanese TV programs into other Asian markets refutes the unambiguous power of Western cultural products in the world; the localization strategies of Japanese cultural industries are grounded upon the exploitation of global-
local dynamics; the global circulation of Japanese animations and
the involvement of Japanese corporations in global media
conglomerates shows the diffusion of cultural power. The
activities of Japanese media industries at three levels – global,
regional, local – suggest that decentered process of cultural
globalization has given added weight to their transnational
activities (Iwabuchi 2002a: 202).

Within such a diffused, disparate economy of media production from multiple
points, non-Western soap operas have emerged as a popular phenomenon in many
locations around the world like Malaysia. Thussu (2007) recently called such
trends in media production and consumption, (particularly in non-Western settings
that have sidelined the American domination) ‘contra-flows’. Some examples of
such ‘contra-flows’ television programs are Latin American telenovelas,
Bollywood films and the Al-Jazeera channel.

The popularity of non-Western soaps in Malaysia is well documented in the
national media. Most of the news coverage of non-Western soaps focuses on
Malay women and their obsession with the characters and storylines of these
soaps. Reports in the local press estimate that millions of Malay women regularly
tune into Korean, Latin American and Indonesian soaps screened on local
television channels (Farinordin 2003; John, Damis and Chelvi 2003a; 2003b).
According to Bidin (2003) and Hamzah (2006), the lure of modernity that
underpins their popularity is reflected in the cultural landscape in various trends
among Malay audiences. In terms of content, the ubiquitous format of family
drama and romance in these soaps is interwoven with depictions of a modern
lifestyle (Bidin 2003). A broader consumer culture of mobile phones, luxurious
cars, dining out, pop music, and foreign locales depicted in these soaps also reinforce the upwardly mobile, middle class aspirations of the audiences for a modern life in Malaysia (Bidin 2003; Utusan Malaysia 2002; Shahir 2003). What is really significant in these reports is that they identify elements of capitalist modernity and modern lifestyle as the reasons that attract Malay women to watch non-Western soaps. These soaps provide a fictional female-centred world of romantic love and family drama in the modern world, in which women’s experiences are privileged and valued. The hugely popular Korean actor Bae Yong Jun, with his handsome looks and genteel personality is often seen as the image of the modern Asian man (Bidin 2002). The Indonesian soap, *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, boasting an average of four million viewers in Malaysia per episode, intersperses material culture with fantastical folkloric storyline about supernatural phenomena to represent social issues of interest in modern middle class Indonesian family life (Bernama 2007a; Saharani 2007). In fact, the obsession with these foreign soaps also stimulated interest in global tourism as well. The number of Malaysians visiting South Korea jumped drastically from 55,848 in 2001 to 82,700 in 2002, which was more than double the 36,459 Malaysians who visited South Korea in 1995 after the surge in popularity of South Korean soaps *Winter Sonata* in Malaysia (Kong 2003). Given this sudden rise in its popularity, *halal* tourism packages have also cropped up to cater to Muslim Malay tourists visiting South Korea (Mohamad 2008). In this way, non-Western soap operas have not only expanded the imagination of the Malay audiences but also initiated a relocation of Malay culture beyond the boundaries of Malaysia.
Television, global cultural flows and the deterritorialization of imagination

This anxiety about Malay women disengaging from the cultural locale of the nation by watching foreign television content is reflective of what Appadurai in his study of transnational cultural flows has identified as the capacity of media to assist in the ‘deterritorialization of imagination’. According to Appadurai, imagination has always been part of the social repertoire of every society in this world and it is consistently expressed through ‘dream, songs, fantasies, myths, and stories’. But now mass media particularly television ‘presents a rich, ever changing store of possible lives, some of which enter the lived imaginations of ordinary people more successfully than others’ (1996: 53). While being located in a specific cultural and physical locale, people on the ground can engage with images from distant locales.

As John B. Thompson puts it, the rapid development of media in the 20th century has shown its ability to provide a platform to ‘transform the spatial and temporal organization of social life, creating new forms of action and interaction, and new modes of exercising power, which are no longer linked to the sharing of a common locale’ (Thompson 1995: 4).

This notion of deterritorialisation of imagination put forward by Appadurai and echoed by these other scholars is an important concept for this thesis. The social impact of media has often been described in terms of its role as a tool to unite and imagine communities, a famous case being Benedict Anderson’s thesis about the role of print media in creating the nation as the definitive form of socio-political union in Europe (Anderson 1983). However, in a contemporary world of
instantaneous transnational cultural flows, the other side of the social impact of media — its ability to deterritorialise human imagination and expand people’s engagement with the world — has gained precedence in these debates. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam say ‘by facilitating a mediated engagement with “distant” peoples, the media “deterritorialise” the process of imagining communities’ (Shohat and Stam 1996: 145). Examining this nexus between media and modernity, Appadurai (1996: 49) writes that it is important to analyse the cultural dynamics of deterritorialisation to understand the powerful role of modern mass media such as television in weakening cultural ties in particular settings. The contemporary media landscape encompasses a plethora of technologies — internet, mobile phone and satellite radio — but television has emerged as one of the most powerful media in terms of its reach and impact. Allen says that television programs ‘tell us stories, represent the world outside our living rooms, stir our passions, amuse us, and, above all, keep us watching’ (Allen 1992: 2). Television is a ubiquitous media technology that structures our life and infiltrates our everyday life in multiple ways. With television’s ability to construct new ways of imagining space and place (Morley and Robins 1995: 128), media also has the potential to promote new forms of engagement with the existent social world and this facility affects everyday life interaction too.

In this case, the exposure of Malay women to cultural influences from foreign locales brought by media texts like non-Western soap operas contribute to such a process of deterritorialisation. The risk to the integrity of the nation and cultural identity, through the deterritorialisation of the imagination, is a major issue of concern for the state and its subject. According to Yang ‘the mass media are vehicles for imagining not only the nation but also the larger space beyond the national borders — that is, the wider world. This transnational aspect of media
must not be neglected, because it harbours potential for liberation from hegemonic nationalism and statism’ (Yang 2002: 326). Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo also say that the state’s concerns about the competition presented by transnational cultural influences for creating identity have arisen because the ‘state is no longer the sole arbiter of the identity of its subjects: it now has to compete for their minds and allegiances with a host of “foreign” entities’ (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 23).

Questions about Malay women consuming cultural flows through television

In this process of consuming images from transnational sources, how do Malay women engage with televisual representations of modernity, which may be quite distant from their lived reality? If deterritorialisation is brought about by representations of modernity on selected television programs, how does that happen? This is a complex question since Appadurai claims that ‘not all deterritorialization is global in its scope, and not all imagined lives span vast international panoramas. The world on the move affects even small geographical and cultural spaces’ (Appadurai 1996: 61). How does the phantasm of an alternative modernity displayed in non-Western soaps play out for Malay audiences? By providing ethnographical data from my fieldwork among rural and urban Malay women, this thesis will map out ideas to explain this process of Malay women’s consumption of non-Western soaps.

Watching competencies

Malaysian authorities worry that many images of modernity on non-Western soap operas run counter to or are in some conflict with the framework of Malaysian
modernity which is constituted by a combination of local ideas and values including Islam, *adat*, Asian values discourse, NEP, Islamisation policy, Look East Policy, *Islam Hadhari*, and so forth. The anxiety of the Malaysian authorities around this television genre is built on these factors but also on a rather simplistic and now discredited ‘effects’ theory of communication.

This era of engaging with modernity through the pervasive culture of soap operas has unlocked the private space of Malay homes in remote villages and the urban locales alike. But contrary to the state’s perception about women’s vulnerability to foreign influences, my fieldwork has enabled me to form a more grounded and complex view of Malay women’s viewing attitudes. I argue that the scenario cannot be summed up as a question of Malay women being manipulated as passive vulnerable subjects, either in a negative or positive way. I will argue that Malay women are not passive consumers who are just seduced by the lure of foreign modernity and who will simply emulate the images they see on television. As Barker (2000: 269) has claimed audiences are knowledgeable, dynamic and ‘active producers of meaning’ within their socio-cultural boundaries.

Malay women do not lose all sense of their cultural constraints but engage in a mode of negotiation where they consistently position the ideological discourses of *adat* and Islam as their cultural resources to exercise watching competencies. Watching competencies can be conceptualised as a form of tactical negotiation through which Malay women interpret the soaps in a manner that helps them to negotiate potential conflicts. It is crucial to point out here that with ‘cultural resources’ I refer to women’s interpretations of the systematised ideologies prescribed as models of ideal behaviour by the state. ‘Watching competencies’ involve an active mobilisation of those resources through which Malay women
watch these soaps and measure their adherence to tradition. I suggest that, given the pervasive hold of cultural ideologies of adat, Islam and some discourses of the local authorities that help to construct Malaysian modernity, Malay women negotiate depictions of modernity through such worldviews. But they invoke their own interpretations of the ideologies like Islam and adat imposed by the state’s directives, to reconstitute their own version of cultural resources.

With this argument of watching competencies, I want to suggest a perspective that transcends the extreme arguments of both kinds. I argue that Malay women are not resistive or submissive subjects; neither are they manipulated in a negative or positive way. This insight highlights the tensions and reconciliations in the relationship between subjects and a somewhat repressive cultural order. By exercising watching competencies, Malay women express their allegiance to the cultural order, but they do not at the same time passively submit to it nor rebelliously oppose it. Their personal adjustment reflects different aspects of the dynamic of private accommodation.

Although many previous scholars have suggested the potential of soap opera to be a particularly potent site for women to stage resistance against their patriarchal social order (Brown 1994; Geraghty 1991; Lee and Cho 1990), I want to extend on this view given the criticism of banality of the concept of resistance in cultural studies (Morris 1990) and the specificities of Malay society. In their responses, the participants in this study rejected the notion of being vulnerable subjects, but they also seemed complicit in submitting to the patriarchal order. Parameters of subjection for the most part are defined and accepted without question.
It is also important to note here that Malay women’s watching competencies are completely different from Charlotte Brunsdon’s earlier theory of feminine competencies of watching soap opera. Brunsdon proposed her theory of feminine competencies to designate soap opera as a gendered or feminine television genre. She argued that soap’s audiences required the possession of certain types of cultural knowledge in order to make sense with this television genre. Taking the famous British soap opera *Crossroads* as an example, she asserts that cultural knowledge is a major form of competence for women because it closely associates with ‘the socially acceptable codes and conventions for the conduct of personal life’ (Brunsdon 1981: 36). As further argued by Brunsdon, the relationship of women as the audience for soap as a cultural text cannot be determined solely by that text but it must involve positionalities of ‘ideological and moral frameworks, the rules, of romance, marriage and family life’ to create pleasure of watching.

Brunsdon’s argument is extremely important for identifying the femininity of soap opera — and I will explain this further in chapter three of this thesis — but I should like to make a distinction in the practice of ‘watching competencies’ among Malay women in terms of consumption process of non-Western soap opera. To some extent, of course, some elements in watching competencies might share some resonance with Brunsdon’s feminine competencies. For example, Malay women will be positioning their personal life including discourses of motherhood and sexuality or even constructed ideology such as *adat* to negotiate non-Western soaps as everyday cultural text. However, watching competencies are very fluid in terms of their character and are not fixed to any specific gender or ethnic background issue. This research focuses on Malay women because they happen to be a group which has been identified by the local authorities as a major
consumer of non-Western soaps. The practice of watching competencies could be very much different if different gender or ethnic group consumed this television genre. Watching competencies also indicate complexities in the process of negotiation. As I mentioned earlier, it involves reconstitution of cultural resources. While this situation shows that watching competencies encourage Malay women at the grassroots level to be more active in justifying and interpreting cultural text, it also highlights the possibilities for subverting simplistic interpretation of media effect theory. A group of Malay women in my research, as I mentioned earlier in this section, should not be seen as a passive audience, but that does not mean they are going to disturb the cultural order.

Tony Wilson has pointed out that Malay audiences exercise creative judgment in the process of reinterpretation of foreign programs. He argues that ‘a tactical reading is able to poach from textual content of one ideological persuasion to construct support for an opposing worldview. The moral polarity of a program can be reversed’ (Wilson 2004: 110). With watching competencies, I will show how Malay women may express interest in images of a transnational, consumerist modernity but re-interpret them to suit their worldview that places primacy on the Malay cultural order. Instead of claiming outright resistance against the patriarchal Malay social order, Malay women adopt a process of negotiation. They draw on the discourse of Malaysian modernity as the critical interpretative framework placing the state’s vision at the centre of this cognition process. They may take pleasure in images of ‘modern life’ in the big cities of Tokyo and Seoul but they still uphold Malay tradition as the basic interpretational/ideological master frame.
Watching competencies are also not a set of static skills but fluid tactics that are performed spontaneously. In other words, there is no precise or static framework that can encompass their negotiation and engagement. They may change from time to time and vary in terms of their approach, depending on how each respondent reacts and justifies their individual engagement with modernity. I will desist from generalising a finding from a particular location or a respondent as a universal statement reflecting all Malay women. In fact, I believe that instead of being a reflection of the whole population of Malay women, paying attention to the nuances of each response helps foreground the ‘diversity of experience’ (Wilson 2004: 18) that may exist in a society with reference to one single phenomenon.

**Contribution to the field**

My thesis is situated in an inter-disciplinary academic field which includes womens studies, media and television studies, popular culture studies and cultural studies. I believe that my argument about critical watching competencies makes a new contribution in the field of media and television studies. The ‘cultural studies paradigm’ which renewed interest in qualitative research on media audience (Seiter 1999) is a foundational theory informing my work and my argument about ‘watching competencies’. The large amount of previous influential audience research such as Nationwide study (David Morley 1986), the romance book consumption study (Janice Radway 1984), the Dallas popularity and consumption study (Ien Ang 1985), and a study of video cassette recorder use (Ann Gray 1987) posit that audiences can no longer be framed solely as active, passive, accommodative or resistive, but as very fluid in the sense of consumption and meaning making.
In a study of the relations between American women and television, Press argues that ‘television reception is a complicated process, one that cannot be adequately summarized either by the term “resistance” or by the terms “passivity” and “accommodation” ’ (Press 1991: 174). When I factor in this argument about active audiences, I will argue that women as a responsive audience cannot be slotted into predetermined categories of either ‘accommodative’ or ‘active’ or ‘resistive’ as their watching activity is a matter of negotiation that spreads into overlapping fields. Beyond of the research cited, there are also a number of cross-cultural audience research studies including popularity and consumption of *Dallas* in Israel by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1993) and everyday consumption amongst Punjabi youth diasporas in UK (1995). These also show various interpretations of cultural text as a major outcome.16

Malay women’s consumption of non-Western soaps will also touch on issues showing the hybrid or continually renegotiated nature of Malaysian modernity in modern Malaysia. As I stated earlier in this chapter, this thesis draws primarily on a large number of theories of modernity and alternative modernity (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Gaonkar 2001; Gomes 1994; Kahn 2001; Ong 2006; Othman 1998; Stivens 2006), transnational cultural flows (Appadurai 1996; Castells 2000; Hannerz 1996; Iwabuchi 2002a; Liebes and Katz 1993; Petras 1993; Robertson 1995; Schiller 1993; Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham 1996; Suh, Kwan and Choi 2007; Thussu 2007; Tomlinson 1999) and deterritorialisation (Allen 1992; Appadurai 1996; Inda and Rosaldo 2002; Morley and Robins 1995; Shohat and Stam 1996; Thompson 1995; Tomlinson 1999; Yang 2002).

Most of the previous studies in the field of television and media consumption in Malaysia by local and foreign scholars including Jamaliah Ahmad (2000), Wang Lay Kim and Zaharom Nain (2001), Latiffah Pawanteh (2004), Abdul Latiff Ahmad, Emma Mirzawati Mohamad and Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri (2005), Juliana Abdul Wahab (2006), and Joanne B. Y. Lim (2008) do not focus on consumption of media products. Instead, most of their research focuses on the development and globalisation of television policy, format and industry in Malaysia. They do not examine grassroots reception of the products as though the popularity of non-Western soap operas and other television genres amongst Malay audiences was simply a top-down phenomenon. My study therefore adds to the literature on the consumption of media texts at the grassroots level in Malaysia.

Although Wilson (2001; 2004) conducts research on the practices and politics of consumption in the Malay world, he does not examine these through the lens of the debate around Malaysian modernity. While Lim (2008) and Ahmad (2000),
and Ahmad, Mohamad and Basri (2005) examine the politics of consumption of media by audiences they choose to make the general setting, identity and background of their respondents anonymous, leading one to ponder how the respondents were ethnographically selected. With such a random sample of the population, important contexts of framing like ethnicity, cultural mores and corresponding attitudes to popular culture are not discussed. Kim and Nain (2001) Pawanteh (2004) and Ahmad, Mohamad and Basri (2005), and Lim (2008) touch upon some aspects of contemporary Malay politics and culture, but their research largely involves students in the local colleges and universities and does not scrutinise the processes of consumption occurring at the grassroots level. They also leave the issue of the consumption of popular culture and its relation with the project of Malaysian modernity untouched.

This study is also aligned with the field of women’s studies, as it explores the relationship between the state and female subjects over issues of cultural identity in a quotidian yet complex issue like watching television. There is some research which examines the role and practice of Muslim Malay women as marginalised group in the nation. In the next chapter, I explain how certain local and foreign sociologists, anthropologists and feminist scholars including Lenore Manderson (1980), Aihwa Ong (1987; 1995), Lucy Healey (1994), Rebecca C. Foley (2001), Noraini Othman (2006) and Maila Stivens (1994; 1996; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; 2006) have addressed the relationship between Malay women and the state, their involvement in politics, factory, NGOs etc. I think, however, that most of this literature focuses on the political and cultural aspects of Malay women without illustrating the importance of media and activities in the realm of everyday life. While these studies examine signs of modern consciousness amongst Malay women participating in the spheres of political activism and industrialisation, they
neglect the role of a ubiquitous and influential medium like popular culture in bringing a sense of modernity into the lives of ordinary Muslim Malay women.

This research focuses on Malay women rather than women from other ethnic groups because they are the main audience of these programs and Malaysian modernity is largely defined by the mandate of Malay culture and Islam. While all the criticism toward the popularity of non-Western soaps consumption has been championed by UMNO, it is fair to say here the comments about the danger of this television genre can be linked only to Malay women. Although some previous soap opera scholars (Ang 1985; Brown 1994; Hobson 1982, 2003; Lin and Tong 2008; Maclachlan and Chua 2004; Spence 2005) have produced a considerable amount of research about the politics of consumption in the field of media, television and popular culture targeted at women, the case of Malay women has not yet been studied carefully.

**Thesis structure**

This thesis is composed of nine chapters, including this introduction and a conclusion. In the first chapter, I have generally outlined the main discussion of this thesis. I began with an outline of the research problem focusing on popularity of non-Western soaps among Malay women and the controversy surrounding the phenomenon. I raised the main research question of this thesis: How do Malay women engage with transnational cultural content of modernity presented in the non-Western soaps while maintaining their adherence to the local framework of Malaysian modernity? I explained the potential of non-Western soaps as a vehicle for transnational modern images and how this television genre has been promoted by the local authorities to display non-Western modernity.
Then I introduced the concept of watching competencies to argue that Malay women’s cultural values are not endangered by consuming non-Western soap opera everyday. Next, I situated this qualitative thesis as an inter-disciplinary study, drawing from women studies, media studies and cultural studies.

Chapter two outlines a brief history of early instances of Malay women’s encounter with the project of developing alternative modernity in Malaysia. Firstly, I begin with the definition of modernity as a complex term and a phenomenon with shifting meanings, as I believe that this theoretical discussion is extremely important for understanding the state-women relationship. Secondly, I investigate the role of UMNO and its attempt to reinvent tradition to construct an alternative modernity for Malay society by championing Malay adat, Islamic revivalism and Asian values as the dominant cultural ideologies. Thirdly, I highlight women’s participation in political and economic changes in the nation since independence. Under this section, I will further elaborate the concept of ‘engaging with modernity’ and the early attempts made by local authorities to associate Malay women’s role in modernity with the domestic sphere. The final part of this chapter will highlight the influences of Malaysian modernity on some other sites of popular culture affecting women such as magazines, local films and songs.

Chapter three is concerned with soap opera as a new site for engaging with modernity. I begin this chapter with the definition of soap opera as a television genre. Then, I will explain its content, structure and status as a women-oriented genre. This chapter also seeks to highlight how soaps act as sites for women to engage with modernity due to the elements of consumer culture, escapism and mediated reality that deterritorialise the imagination of audiences.
Chapter four focuses on the emergence of non-Western soaps on Malaysian television. I begin this chapter by outlining an overview of the Malaysian television history. Then, I will discuss the emergence of non-Western soap operas on Malaysian television and how this television genre is positioned in a map of transnational cultural flows. Next, I will contextualise non-Western soap operas as a popular site for engaging with modernity in Malaysia. Finally, this chapter will talk about the reception of non-Western soaps and viewing habits of Malay women in contemporary Malaysia.

The second part of the thesis presents analyses of the feedback from the respondents in the field to elaborate my argument of ‘watching competencies’. I begin the second part with chapter five to discuss matters relating to the research methodology utilised for the study. It situates this study in relation to methodological approaches and bodies of literature in reception and audience studies about the consumption of cultural texts. I discuss the relevance of audience ethnography for my study. Then, I justify my choice of one-to-one in-depth interviews with respondents as the primary research method in the field. Finally, I outline the process of selecting respondents and give some information about each respondent with a brief participant profile.

Chapters six, seven, eight and nine of this thesis present my findings proving my argument of ‘watching competencies’ to show that Malay women tread a line of negotiation where they uphold Malay cultural expectations while deriving pleasure from the images of modernity depicted in these soaps. My research findings are based on an analysis of responses from Malay women in a remote kampung and an urban location in Malaysia. I have compiled my findings and
analyses into four major themes that constitute each chapter. All these themes can be seen as reflecting different sets of watching competencies. These four chapters elaborate my argument of watching competencies to answer the question about how Malay women attempt to engage with the representations of modernity in the non-Western soap operas while adhering to the local framework of modernity at the same time.

Chapter six takes up the first theme: moral capability. In this chapter I use the term ‘moral capability’ because I see Malay women invoking the moral expectations of the discourses of Malaysian modernity to frame a watching competency, which enables them to undertake this process of negotiation with regard to morally or sexually risqué content in these soaps. There are two sub-categories of this competency, which I have categorised as: selective viewing and oppositional viewing.

Chapter seven discusses the second watching competency of cultural proficiency. Here, I examine how Malay women negotiate their soap watching habits in view of the charge made by the local authorities that this activity lures women away from domestic and communal duties. I argue that the relationship between non-Western soaps and the women is a process of negotiation within the Malay cultural terrain. To establish this argument, I have identified two tactics within cultural proficiency: family values and community values.

Chapter eight is about Malay women as discerning consumers. This chapter highlights the anxiety of the local authorities about the corruptive effect of consumerism on Malay women. I will argue that Malay women consistently invoke their knowledge of appropriate codes of consumption in the Malay world
to exercise watching competency as discerning consumers. Malay women exercise such tactics as discerning consumers with regards to: presentation of self and urban lifestyle.

Chapter nine examines the last theme of my analysis and findings. This chapter is concerned with adult capacity. Here, I examine how Malay women reject the notion of being passive, vulnerable subjects to claim competency as adults with life-experience and cultural knowledge. I discuss two kinds of tactics that Malay women that involves this watching competency of adult capability: adhering to cultural conventions and strategic disobedience.

The final chapter provides the conclusion of the thesis where I will argue that Malay women actually strengthen traditional culture by exercising watching competencies when they want to engage with modernity. I reiterate the importance of replacing the linear arguments of passive, resistive or accommodative audience with the concept of a ‘savvy’ audience and the practice of watching competencies. I propose ‘watching competencies’ as a new Asian-style framework for studying audiences, transnational cultural flows and commodity consumption.
CHAPTER TWO: MALAY WOMEN AND THE PROJECT OF ALTERNATIVE MODERNITY IN MALAYSIA

We want to be a developed nation by the year 2020, but we want to be developed in our very own mould and based on our very own value system (Former Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohammad) (New Straits Times 2002a).

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the debates surrounding the concept of modernity in Malaysia and the ramifications it holds for the development of popular culture on the one hand and the place of women in Malay society on the other. This chapter is divided into four main parts. The first part examines the complexities of modernity in Malaysia and how it has been conceived, justified and promoted as a form of ‘alternative modernity’ in contrast to Eurocentric or Western forms. The second part focuses on the role of reinventing tradition in developing the project of Malaysian alternative modernity, with the UMNO at the centre of this process. The third part discusses the participation of Malay women within the project of Malaysian modernity with some earlier instances where the roles of Malay women were subjected to public scrutiny. The last part of this chapter focuses on how the government’s agenda about Malaysian modernity has now shifted its focus to the arena of consumption of popular culture by Malay women. Drawing from scholarly literature and newspaper articles, this chapter suggests that the government’s vision of alternative modernity attempts to associate Malay women’s role in modernity with the domestic sphere in order to preserve the traditional patriarchal cultural order.
Alternative modernity in Malaysia

While the term *modernity* is used ubiquitously, its actual meaning is quite ambiguous and polysemous, with multiple connotations that cannot be conclusively pinned down. Most commonly it is understood as a cultural ethos or period that breaks with tradition. One consistent feature that is often associated with modernity is a sense of newness and breaking from the old. Anthony Giddens says ‘inherent in the idea of modernity is the contrast with tradition’ (Giddens 1991: 36). Some scholars have claimed that the process of engaging with modernity involves a new mode of thinking as well as transformation of physical conditions such as lifestyle and economy (Barker 2000; Chong 2005; Giddens 1990; Leonard 1996). According to Pathak (1998: 9), modernity is supposedly founded on notions of scientific rationality and secular belief and promotes the development of technology as a major instrumental application.

But Peter Wade claims, ‘modernity is not only “after” tradition (although it is “before” it when it comes to reaching the future), it is “beyond” locality and acts as the “wider context” for it’ (Wade 2007: 51). Zygmunt Bauman also rejects this unilinear conception of modernity by saying that ‘modernity means many things, and its arrival and progress can be traced using many and different markers’ (Bauman 2000: 8). Rita Felski explains that ‘the “modern” acts as a mobile and shifting classification that serves to structure, legitimise, and valorise varied and often competing perspectives’ (Felski 1995: 14-15). Marian Aguiar draws this point further to argue that modernity is not so much a literal point in time, but a rhetorical and representational tool used to valorise a worldview that has its roots in imperialism. She says:
In approaching modernity in a global context, it is useful to think of modernity as rhetoric as it functioned through representational forms. By doing so, one may see both the history of modernity as fluid concept and its role as an instrument of empire, in which its meaning was and is taken as given (Aguiar 2008: 66).

The process of engaging with modernity particularly in postcolonial countries has been marked by various ambiguities due to the legacy of imperialism in ideas of modernity. As Pathak argues, the aspiration to engage with modernity in the typical modernist notion ‘undermines our collective memories, our cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge systems’ (Pathak 1998: 10).

Not only is modernity a complex phenomenon in itself, it is also difficult to define what it stands for in relation to a specific cultural and geographical locale. While there is no doubt that modernity nowadays is simultaneously everywhere (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1995: 2), the narratives and versions of modernity vary, considerably, depending on how it is understood, interrogated and conceived in different national or specific cultural sites. Kaviraj (2000: 137-138) draws this contention further by saying that modernity is a heterogeneous phenomenon because some societies in this world will always remain traditional, insufficiently modernised and unable to produce modernity similar to Western countries. It is also suggested by Moores that ‘the globalising modernity does not have the same universal significance for all the planet’s inhabitants, not even for those who live in the relatively affluent “first world” ’ (Moores 2000: 6).

The complexities of conceptualising modernity arise since it may vary vastly in different cultural formations according to the material factors underpinning the
shift towards modernity and the parameters of judgment guiding that change. In short, societies or countries of this world may constitute and experience their own version of modernity. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff highlight such a temporal constitution of modernity in Africa which is ‘neither simply “African” nor “European,”…modernity — itself always an imaginary construction of the present in terms of a mythic past — has its own magicalities, its own enhancements’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993: xiv). Thus, Taylor suggests that ‘instead of speaking of modernity in the singular, we should better speak of “alternative modernities”’ (Taylor 2001: 182). In his book Alternative Modernities, Gaonkar (2001: 15) argues that non-Western nations strive to produce indigenous versions of modernity that seek to circumvent hegemonic models. Malaysia is one such location, where the state has made the call for an alternative model of modernity that is different from hegemonic Western forms and mindful of its traditional socio-cultural order.

If for ease of purpose we must locate the moment when Malaysia as a nation began to engage in questions about defining modernity, then the phase of New Economic Policy (NEP, 1970-1990) can be marked as a watershed period in its history. Malaysia underwent unprecedented changes under the modernisation programme of the NEP (Crouch 1993). The goals laid out as part of the roadmap of modernisation under the NEP were — ushering in economic progress for Malaysia as a nation; bringing socio-economic equity in a multiracial Malaysian society; creating a Malay middle class group and bringing them into an industrialised economy. The former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohammad launched the Look East Policy to promote the economically robust and industrialised East Asian nations of Korea, Taiwan and Japan as models for building a modern nation in Malaysia.
While the process of modernisation of the economy was undertaken with clear goals of industrialisation by following precedents of other advanced economies especially the East Asian ones, the notion of modernity as a new cultural phase for Malaysia was fraught with doubts and concerns. While adopting the path of modernisation for material and economic benefits, the government was mindful of the cultural impact of such changes on its existent social structure. The shift into modernity in Malaysia was seen as a matter of negotiating the cultural ramifications of ‘foreign’ forms of modernity in order to establish a ‘homemade’ version for Malaysia (Kahn 2001). Many scholars have chosen to label such a path taken by Malaysia as a version of alternative modernity. As Joel Kahn notes, Malaysian modernity is not modelled entirely on Western modernity, but one that seeks to articulate alternative forms that will be more appropriate to the national and cultural specificities of Malaysia (Kahn 2001: 120).

The modernisation programme under NEP brought about a plethora of social transformations such as increasing urbanisation, the rise of a bourgeois public sphere, a burgeoning consumer culture, cosmopolitanism and the advent of transnational media. In particular, the invention of the Melayu Baru or a new class of modern middle class Malays was a crucial feature on the agenda of Malaysian modernity. The objective of the NEP was not just to modernise the economy, but also to create a new generation of middle class Malays who were to have the education and skills to participate in this new economy (Shamsul 1997: 257). The UMNO-led government followed policies to lobby for a greater role for the ethnic majority Malays who were seen at that point as not having their rightful share in the country's wealth. In turn, this new middle class Malay or Melayu Baru, who now wielded dominance in every sphere of polity in Malaysia, began to exert influence in defining all aspects of the project of modernity for the nation at large.
UMNO and its attempt to reinvent tradition for alternative modernity

In Malaysia, the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) is the political entity that dominates the political landscape of the nation and leads this debate of Malaysian modernity. UMNO was founded in 1946 to unite Malays and champion Malay rights in the spheres of economic and social activities. After the British introduced the concept of Malay Union to administer Malaya, UMNO launched series of demonstrations to oppose this suggestion. Under the concept of Malayan Union proposed by the British, all Malay states including Singapore would be incorporated and unified under a single administrative unit in Malaya (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 254). This Malayan Union undermined Malay rights, mainly the power of the Malay Sultanate in political decision-making, citizenship, religion, language, education and so forth.

After the nation gained independence from Britain in 1957, UMNO retained its power as the most influential political party in Malaysia. It also collaborated with other non-Malay political parties and officially formed the Barisan Nasional (National Front) in 1974 which has been in government ever since. Led by UMNO, the Barisan Nasional introduced various policies to restructure Malaysian society and economy, like the New Economic Policy (NEP) after the riots in 1969. I have elaborated UMNO’s agenda of restructuring Malaysian economy and creating the new middle class Malay Melayu Baru in the last section. However, I want to focus here on the role of UMNO in reinventing elements of Malay tradition to further define its vision of modernity and retain the power of ethnic Malays.
Bestor has shown how Japanese society ‘invokes tradition to legitimate the present by reference to an idealized, a historical past’ (Bestor 1989: 11). Similarly, UMNO cultivates a sense of loyalty among its members through its adaptation and reappropriation of tradition. In fact, as a party established by Malay elites and aristocrats, UMNO even derives its legitimacy from traditional Malay hierarchical structure. According to Crouch, ‘UMNO was by no means a radical nationalist party’, since many of its members are Malay aristocrats who worked in the civil sector and were employed by the British (Crouch 1996: 36). According to Hari Singh, UMNO constantly reinvents Malay tradition, largely by making connections with the greatness of the Malacca Sultanate. He asserts that:

An interesting aspect of Malay society as represented by UMNO is the role of tradition in politics. Political-cultural symbols invented by UMNO elites in the twentieth century were given legitimacy through linkages to a mythical past, and were used for the purpose of maintaining power (Singh 1998: 250).

Such a re-appropriation of the past by UMNO affirms Hobsbawm’s statement that, ‘“traditions” which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented’ (Hobsbawm 1983: 1). It is therefore essential to understand the term ‘invented traditions’ and it relation to the creation of Malaysian modernity by UMNO. According to Hobsbawm,

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity
with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past...‘Tradition’ in this sense must be distinguished clearly from ‘custom’ which dominates so-called ‘traditional’ societies. The object and characteristic of ‘traditions’, including invented ones, is invariance. The past, real or invented, to which they refer imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices, such as repetition (Hobsbawm 1983: 1-2).

Custom and tradition are interrelated terms. However, custom as proposed by Hobsbawm is more action related and is fixed by society, while tradition is more fluid and is akin to a worldview used to legitimate certain behaviours. Thus, tradition can be defined as an imagined idea about the way a specific custom should be implemented in society by citing its roots in the past. Therefore, inventing tradition, as Hobsbawm clarifies is ‘essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition’ (Hobsbawm 1983: 4).

Of interest for my study is the ways in which local authorities in Malaysia have refused to copy Western modernity, but have appropriated the past in order to reinvent many traditional values particularly those of Malay adat and Islam to define Malaysian modernity. Islam has had a profound transformational effect on the Malay Peninsula. But it was the *dakwah* or Islamic revivalism of the 1970s that championed Islam as a sacrosanct part of Malay history. Under the sway of a global trend of Islamic resurgence in many Muslim countries during the 1970s, the newly created strata of middle class Malays initiated campaigns to make Malaysia more Islamic too (Othman 1998: 175). As the new middle class Malays
under UMNO spearheaded various development projects of the NEP across the country, they also brought tenets of Islamic revivalism to the modernisation programme. In fact, many key figures of the Islamic revivialist movement held important positions in the public sphere as cabinet ministers, scholars, professionals and industrialists (Shamsul 1997: 253). Consequently, the Malaysian vision of modernity is heavily influenced by the ideology of Islamic revivalism (Ong (2006: 47-8).

This process of reinventing tradition also interprets customs to suit political contingencies, reinscribing what people can do or cannot do within the given socio-political order. The reinvention of Islam and adat as inviolable cultural norms rooted in the deep past of the nation, can also be seen as a political strategy built to suit the requirements of the dominant Malay Muslim cultural order. In his study of the reinvention of tradition in Malaysia by the authorities, Kessler notes:

It is also manufactured, strategically crafted, by those suddenly in need of a serviceable past or needing urgently to refurbish a past that has become somehow (the irony is a nice one!) out of date: by communities coming into being or undergoing fundamental transformation and reconstruction and, specifically, by those exercising or contending for ascendancy within them (Kessler 1992: 142).

UMNO authorities stress the paramount importance of loyalty amongst its members and object to any attempts to challenge the leadership by labelling it kurang ajar or disrespectful (Singh 1998: 244-6).
What is interesting to note here is that critics say that UMNO’s appropriation of Islam was a strategy to counter its rival the PAS, an Islamic political party in Malaysia (Mohamad 2002; Singh 1998; Sundaram and Cheek 1988). Established in 1951, PAS or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party was originally the former religious wing of UMNO (Crouch 1996: 64). Although PAS had formed an alliance with UMNO to form government, PAS left the coalition in 1977 after the race riots in 1969 protesting its desire for an Islamic agenda (Sundaram and Cheek 1988: 849-850). According to Cheng, UMNO was ‘fearful of the presence of PAS in the coalition government and external pressure emerging from the revivalist movement, increased its involvement in Islamic affairs’ (Cheng 2006: 8). Thus, the Islamisation policy introduced by UMNO in the 1980s emerged as a strategic attempt to avow its allegiance to an Islamic agenda, retain the loyalty of Malay Muslims and counter the somewhat extremist Islamic influence of PAS.

The Islamisation project included the launch of institutions like Islamic banks, International Islamic University and social bodies. The local authorities also established Sharia law and banned Muslims from entering local casinos and put curbs on socialisation between men and women in public (Crouch 1996: 170). While PAS often complained that the government’s actions were not strictly in line with Islamic values, their criticism only gained marginal interest and UMNO was able to maintain its influence amongst Malays (Sundaram and Cheek 1998: 86).

UMNO continued to take on different areas of social reform under its agenda of envisioning an Islamic modernity. In the mid 2000s, the then Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi launched Islam Hadhari, to re-instate his vision of alternative modernity for Malaysia as a progressive and forward-looking Islamic state.
(Hoffstaedter 2009). According to Hoffstaedter, ‘Islam Hadhari is translated as “civilisational” or “progressive” Islam, which paradoxically aims to bring Islam back to basics, back to its original form, as well as project it into the future’ (Hoffstaedter 2009: 121).

This brief timeline shows the reinvention of tradition in the form of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia that has dominated national politics for the last few decades. Although the government advocates capitalist development to support economic and social transformations, Malay and UMNO dominance in national politics ensures that Islam remains the spiritual and moral discourse invoked to guide this path of progress for Malaysia.

In Malaysia, even the definition of being Malay is determined not so much by claims to indigeneity but by Islam as a religion (Lie and Lund 1994: 31). The Malaysian constitution states that someone can be identified as Malay if she or he is Muslim, speaks proficiently in Malay and practices Malay customs every day. For example, if a man with Chinese heritage converts to Islam, speaks the Malay language, and practices Malay customs, he can be considered a ‘Malay’ person. However, someone who is born Malay, but refuses to practice Islam and Malay customs will encounter problems in being accepted as a Malay (Mutalib 1993: 18).

Adat is a general term signifying the category of traditional cultural values and practices, which has also been appropriated by UMNO leaders to invent and reinvent tradition to create its vision of Malaysian modernity. Apart from creating Islam as a foundational discourse of national modernity through their influence in policy making, the middle class Malays also propagate the notion of Malay adat
or a traditional code of ethics. *Adat* is often invoked as a more secular code of general ethics or cultural norms that is seen as a timeless tradition with Malay roots which ‘directly and indirectly defines Malay life’ (Abdullah 1984: 100). *Adat* is seen as providing the framework for systematising the more mundane aspects of Malay culture like social etiquette, family values, community interaction and interpersonal socialisation. Islam is invoked as the moral and spiritual foundation for Malay life, but discourses of mundane social behaviour tend to be associated with the cultural norms of *adat*. *Adat* is also often invoked as a moral ethic to guide issues pertaining to social behaviour that Islamic tenets may not touch upon. For example, it is the *adat* perception of Malays as tolerant, benign people that is often invoked to promote a harmonious multiracial society, a subject that may not find direct resonance in Islamic tenets. Islam and *adat* clearly plays an important role in focussing on defining the unique demands and visions of the ideology of a Malaysian modernity ‘…which is different from…the modernity of other Muslim countries …or from that of Western democracies’ (Abdullah 1984: 100). In fact, the integration of Islam and *adat* adds to what government rhetoric positions as a unique vision of alternative modernity for Malaysia.

To the melange of these key ideologies guiding the path to alternative modernity was added the ‘Asian Values’ discourse, which arose in the 1980s at a time when many East and Southeast Asian countries were in the heyday of their early economic success (Kessler 1999; Manan 1999). The term Asian Values was coined to valorise a rhetoric promoting essentialised features of Asian societies as unique attributes that distinguished Asia from the West. It was argued that these attributes contributed to the rapid economic success in these Asian countries and
could help them negotiate future challenges. Malaysia was a key participant in the
debate about the Asian Values where these nations engaged in introspective
discussions, laid future goals on the ramifications of their newfound economic
success (Thompson 2001: 156). Taking the advanced economies of Korea,
Taiwan and Japan rather than the West as the closest models to emulate, Malaysia
not only edged closer into the network of the Asian Tigers of this boom period in
terms of economic partnerships but also made cultural alliances with those
nations. And so the Asian Values discourse as another ideological discourse was
integrated into the vision of alternative modernity for Malaysia.

The integration of the discourses of Islam, Malay cultural values and Asian
Values shows that ‘alternative modernity’ seeks a unique vision of modernity for
a society by filtering normative models of modernity through the value systems
specific to that society. The paramount importance given to these ideologies also
shows that tradition is not seen as something opposed to modernity in this context.
As opposed to the normative definition of modernity as a phenomenon antithetical
to tradition in the West (Giddens 1991: 36), one might argue that tradition is
reconstructed here. In fact, tradition is valorised in new forms in the ideological
battlefield for defining an alternative modernity. And in Malaysia, such a
reinvention of tradition can be seen in all the aspects of Malay modernity. Islamic
revivalism brought in a more rigorous Arab-influenced Islam into the country. A
loose body of social mores was systematised into a code of behaviour called the
adat. And an essentialised definition of being an Asian was constructed under the
newly coined Asian Values discourse. Tradition is not discarded in the face of
modernity, but is reconstructed to pose as a counter-perspective to the challenges
of a hegemonic version of ‘Western’ modernity.
Partha Chatterjee (1997) suggests that such debates over the models of nationhood and modernity to be followed in postcolonial nations occur, because these concepts emerged in a Western historical context and are difficult to adapt to longstanding indigenous socio-political contexts. Consequently, these nations tend to hark back to the past in order to retain some sense of identity for negotiating the future. The use of nostalgia in the project of Malaysian modernity has strategically constructed a glorious memory of Malay Islamic civilisation in order to command the loyalty of Malays. Chatterjee suggests that the past is seen as mature, prosperous period replete with achievement while the present is seen as a period of incompleteness and dissatisfaction:

At the opposite end from ‘these days’ marked by incompleteness and lack of fulfillment, we construct a picture of ‘those days when there was beauty, prosperity and a healthy sociability, and which was, above all, our own creation. ‘Those days’ for us is not a historical past; we construct it only to mark the difference posed by the present…Western modernity, looks at the present as the site of one’s escape from the past, for us it is precisely the present from which we fell we must escape’ (Chatterjee 1997: 20).

‘Those days’, through the lens of Islamic revivalism and reclamation of adat, mean that Malay women are expected to retain their tradition (Healy 1994; Stivens 1998b; 2000; 2006; Cheng 2006). In the next section, I will define what it means for Malay women to be included in the modernity project. I will also present my review of some previous literature to illuminate some measures taken by the UMNO to guide the direction of modernity in Malaysia to retain Malay women within the ambit of Malay tradition. There are many previous studies
about how Malay women engage with the national project of modernity. I have described these earlier instances of Malay women’s engagement with modernity and the different forays they made into the spheres of politics, economy and culture.

**Malay women and earlier instances of engagement with the Malaysian project of modernity**

One crucial question within this debate of alternative modernity in Malaysia concerns the positioning and role of Malay women. In examining the relations between women and modernity, Felski has argued, ‘categories of periodisation and the criteria used to define them appear profoundly altered when women become the focal point of enquiry instead of men’ (Felski 1992: 139). In Malaysia, the discussion of women’s role in modernisation is subjected to a different treatment from their male counterparts (Stivens 1994: 66). As the moral compass of Malaysian modernity, Islam and its gender norms have made the role of Malay women in the modernisation process a sensitive issue to be monitored. As Maila Stivens notes, ‘the role of the Malaysian state in championing a version of Islamic modernity has greatly complicated the engagements of reformist Muslim women with the state in working for women’s (human) rights in families, and new form of family’ (Stivens 2006: 363).

Much has been written about Malay women and their engagement with the nascent phase of modernity in Malaysia and this will be further discussed in the course of the thesis. The last few decades have seen a proliferation of sites in which such engagement can be located. A significant portion of literature on this subject often suggests that the consciousness of women is a contentious issue that the government struggles to monitor. The increased freedom given to women in
modern societies has been criticised for leading to moral impropriety such as promiscuous sexuality among young women, inter-racial marriages and cultural decay such as the breakdown of family and community relations. Women’s encounter with modernity is often fraught with ambivalence within a patriarchy where adat and Islam govern the code of behaviour. Malay norms of adat and Islamic tenets about gender percolate into all policy issues. Even the Asian Values debate sought to emphasise the role of women in nurturing family values in a modern Malaysia, through such campaigns as Happy Family and My Home My Heaven (Stivens 2006).

Women have to undertake a delicate balancing act of pursuing the desirable aspects of modernisation such as participating as productive citizens in the economy, while adhering to conventional social mores as Muslim women and nurturers of families. The surveillance of women has become a popular topic and charged ideological battlefield through which the government champions and orchestrates a vision of alternative modernity with Islamic values, Malay roots and Asian orientation which it seeks for the country at large. Women’s issues are so significant that they are almost representative of the debate over the whole project of alternative modernity. Malay women are frequently deployed as metaphors for the conflicting aspects of modernity (Stivens 1998b: 93).

An early instance of Malay women’s engagement with modernity can be traced back to the pre-independence period when Malay women stepped out of their conventional role within the domestic sphere into the public space to actively participate in national political movements. The Malay political party UMNO in pre-independence Malaysia saw active involvement of Malay women who ‘were drawn into political world beyond the confines of the village’ and who often
boasted adequate political awareness to participate in various debates (Manderson 1977: 277). The establishment of *Kaum Ibu* in 1947, the women’s section of UMNO, saw the active participation of Malay women in the independence movement. These women ‘were challenging, dominant, vehement in their emergence from meek, quiet roles in the *kampungs*, the rice fields, the kitchen and the nurseries’ (Miller and Abdul 1959: 80). Malay women’s involvement in the independence movement can be seen as one of their earliest attempts to venture into the public sphere and engage with modernity.

But it is also an acknowledged fact that in spite of their active involvement, independence movements like *Kaum Ibu* were still orchestrated by male leaders at the national/divisional level and women were mostly cadres and acted as auxiliary support to these men. Given their subordinate place in the organisational structure, the women never mounted any kind of challenge to male dominance. As Manderson notes *Kaum Ibu* was accepted into the ranks of UMNO only to channel the support of Malay women for the male-led independence movement without changing their traditional role. Despite their active involvement in such a public sphere of activity, their secondary role in the independence movement ‘illustrates the entrenchment of social attitudes regarding the role of women and attests that participation in the public sphere without reassessment of those attitudes does not effect a changed role’ (Manderson 1977: 228). The elected Malay women’s representatives tend to defer to the UMNO leadership in the process of decision-making. Mohamad further adds that women who competed in the elections only won on the basis of the strength of the party instead of their gender (Mohamad 2002: 86).
While broader political movements like *Kaum Ibu*\(^23\) perpetuated the status quo of male dominance, there were also some strands of Malay women's movements in the pre-independence period that sought to reform Malay women’s status in the society. As Harper (1999: 71) notes, this new voice of Malay women which was being increasingly heard in the public sphere, posed a challenge to the old social mores of female subservience. The presence of these movements reflects the presence of a modern consciousness about civil rights and gender equality amongst these Malay women. Yet, even in such nascent shifts towards modernity in these women’s liberation movements, women were more than mindful of tradition. They used Islamic values and *adat* norms to legitimate their grievances and actions. On one occasion some Malay women leaders blatantly flouted Islamic injunctions even to the extent of risking the *fatwa* or ostracism, to participate in a public parade for a royal wedding. One Malay woman leader inversely invoked Islam as giving them the moral authority to do so by saying ‘We are also Muslims…and therefore we too know how far we are religiously privileged to act on any occasion’ (Mamat 1948 cited in Harper 1999). Some Malay women leaders encouraged Malay women to go out unescorted when faced with the dilemma of taking their children to hospitals and inverted an old Malay proverb to strengthen their campaign, ‘let the custom die, but not the child’\(^24\) (Harper 1999: 71). This right to venture out unescorted was not posited as a blatant rebellion against patriarchal control, but argued as part of their duty as nurturing mothers responsible for their child’s health. In these larger political movements, women desisted from forcefully broaching issues of gender equality and even in the sporadic instances of rebellion they only resorted to steps that could be legitimated by tradition.
When Islamic revivalism began to take hold in the Islamic world including Malaysia in the 1970s and 80s, the local authorities saw this as a valuable opportunity to define the terms controlling Malay women’s engagement with modernity. There are various ways in which Malay women’s engagement with modernity has been shaped by Islamic revivalism; some are instigated from the below and some are state-driven. An example of the top-down approach relates to the issue of family planning. Back in the 1960s, under the family planning program, Malay women were told to control their family planning to reduce poverty problems and stress on community facilities and personnel (Mokhtar 2010). In her anthropological research in Malaysia, Ong (1990b: 264) suggests there was prevalent belief that the refusal to have more children meant refusing what ‘Allah giveth’. Religious leaders and villagers cited Islamic Hadith\(^2\) in order to criticise family planning. As Lie and Lund report these religious leaders argued that Islam, ‘emphasizes childbearing as the virtuous role of the women’ (Lie and Lund 1994: 15). However, after the introduction of the New Economic Policy in the 1970s, Malay women were encouraged by the local authorities to increase the birth rate. Campaigns like National Population Policy in 1984 promoted big families to increase population as future reserves of workforce for the modernisation of the nation.

*Tudung* or the headscarf was rediscovered and promoted by UMNO as the appropriate clothing for the modern but culturally grounded Malay women. *Tudung*, also known as *mini-telekung*, is part of the Southeast Asian Islamic female dress. It is a small head scarf which covers the hair, neck and chest area and is different from *burka* in the Middle East which covers the whole body (Anwar 1987: 18). Frisk further notes that there are different styles of this headgear — *telekung, mini-telekung* and *tudung*, which are worn with *baju kurung*
long dress), a traditional Malay women outfit. She says, ‘A small scarf that covers the hair and the neck is called a mini-telekung. A telekung is larger in size and covers also shoulders and the chest. When a scarf is used together with a baju kurung, the whole outfit is referred to as tudung’ (Frisk 2009: 90-91). But Ismail (2004, para. 9) notes, ‘until the late 70s, wearing tudung (headscarf) was not part of the Malaysian Muslim culture. Instead, what was used was a selendang, a long soft shawl which covered the head and was draped loosely over the shoulder.’

There are various ways to interpret this revival of the tudung. The rediscovery of the tudung in Malaysia can be imagined as a symbol of women’s increasing political agency in their support of revivalist and politicised Islam (Stivens 2000: 29-30). In fact, for Stivens, the resurgence of the veiled middle class woman is a symbol of a distinctively Malay modernity (Stivens 1998b: 117). Now, new meanings have now attached themselves to the rediscovery of tudung, changing it from a customary item of clothing enforced by socio-religious compulsions to a fashionable object. Studies state that Malay women nowadays prefer to wear tudung not only because of the Islamic revivalism but ‘because it is considered nice’ (Lie and Lund 1994: 12). The popularity of tudung amongst Malay women is a grassroots phenomenon where women have co-opted Islamic revivalism into their own lives with minimal intervention from the state.

Islamic revivalism has also rewritten the private space of home and family as a woman’s jihad (Stivens 2006) in the struggle for the modernisation of the nation. According to Stivens, the private has become a favoured site for the expression of tensions and ambivalences about the costs of modernity (2006: 358). The family is configured as the central institution of the enlightened Islamic state, and the mother the symbolic and moral pivot. It is their sole duty to keep the family
members united, healthy, and in receipt of a proper education. In order to strengthen family values, local authorities introduced a number of public campaigns such as *Keluarga Bahagia* (Happy Families) *Rumahku Syurgaku* (My Home My Heaven) *Utamakan Keluarga – Semakin Hari Semakin Sayang* (Family First – Bring Your Heart Home) to cultivate a sense of engaging with modernity without forgetting tradition. Such campaigns advocate cultural norms about the primacy of family and home for women. Some critics have pointed out that these campaigns are a type of implicit propaganda to encourage women to stay at home (Stivens 1998a: 60).

Issues about gender and sexuality are central sites for the cultural expression and reworking of the ‘modern’ Malay and Muslim (Stivens 1998b: 116). As Healey notes, ‘what is deemed suitable and appropriate for a contemporary Malay woman is to be “domestic” and therefore “feminine”’ (Healey 1994: 111). Any Malay woman who refuses to marry, practices masculine work, or even cultivates a masculine look is stigmatised as unfeminine and improper. To be the ideal modern Malay women in contemporary Malaysia, Malay women must adopt what is considered ‘proper’ behaviour (New Strait Times, 2002a).

The local authorities also continually redefine the mode of engagement with modernity for Malay women in public space. They reinvent Malay tradition to set the norms by which Malay women can participate in public space and communal duties. The local authorities introduced *Jiran Wanita* (Women’s Movement) to raise awareness of community values (New Strait Times 2000). Through *Jiran Wanita*, the local authorities implemented many activities including neighbourhood watch, cooking courses, religious classes and volunteering activities to nurture community values in the neighbourhood. However, the extent
to which women can engage with these new opportunities in a modern nation is determined by traditional norms of feminine propriety and any activity that transgresses these norms implicitly becomes a taboo act.

The Malaysian financial and political crises in 1998 afforded some new opportunities for Malay women to be actively involved in the public sphere. Anwar Ibrahim was sacked from the government for launching the mass movement reformasi which challenged the then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad’s reign (Mohamad 2002: 94). Anwar’s wife, Wan Azizah was appointed as president of the National Justice Party (KeAdilan) by the political forces that initiated the reformasi movement and she led the party in the national elections. The rise in public awareness about the mass movement of reformasi showed that UMNO’s conservative politics was beginning to be challenged. UMNO used this challenge to divert the disaffection among the public by promising more gender rights (Mohamad 2002: 95-96). UMNO nominated many women candidates to stand against Wan Azizah. In this period of political crisis, UMNO made this move to signal that it was a progressive political party and Malay women could engage in politics at the highest echelons. But some critics argued that nomination of female candidates by UMNO and the nomination of Wan Azizah by the National Justice Party were both just political manoeuvres to out-do one another and these political developments did not necessarily create widespread gender reform in the country. Such superficial changes were nothing more than a means of co-opting the momentum of the pro-reformasi movement and bringing it within the fold of the UMNO with the promise of liberalisation (Weiss 2000: 420-421).
After Mahathir Mohamad stepped down as Prime Minister in 2003, his successor Abdullah Badawi launched the Islam Hadhari campaign to cement the project of alternative modernity and instil a sense of unity in the Malay community after the political crisis of 1998. Abdullah Badawi proposed that one of the principles in the Islam Hadhari was the ‘protection of the rights of minority groups and women’ (Chong 2006: 39). However, Ting argues the promotion of women’s rights under the concept of Islam Hadhari was largely empty rhetoric because ‘the underlying socio-political dynamics confronted by Malay women in the UMNO have not changed in an appreciable way since the party was formed in 1946’ (Ting 2007: 75). Islam Hadhari might talk about empowering women in UMNO and allowing more space for the establishment of local non-governmental groups such as Sisters in Islam (Chong 2006: 42), but was not enforced in full faith due to objection by parochial male members of UMNO (Ting 2007: 97). Ting (2007: 94-95) reports that the initial attempts made by Abdullah Badawi to promote Malay women’s gender rights under the concept of Islam Hadhari, including the Monogamy Campaign for men, was criticised by the local Mufti as being against Islamic teachings and Islamic laws.

The entry of Malay women into the public space is fraught with conflict because women’s code of behaviour is heavily associated with issues of morality. The most significant example of this clash between morality and the new Malay woman happened during the industrialisation process in the 1970s with the launch of the National Economic Policy. By positioning the advanced East Asian economies of Japan, Korea and Taiwan as role models and inviting them as partners and investors into the country, Malaysia embarked on a course of industrialisation. With technology transfer and foreign direct investment from those countries, there was a massive growth of factories in the Malaysian
peninsula. Mostly young rural Malay women were inducted as wage labour in the factories set up under these partnerships (Shamsul 1997: 258).

The induction of Malay women as a workforce into a modern industrialised work culture of independence, wage labour and cash income can be seen as one of the most significant encounters of Malay women with modernity. This encounter can be seen as a microcosm of modernity at work in transforming the social landscape and many factors underpin such a perception. Firstly this was the most far-reaching modernisation policy involving large numbers of people. Secondly, people participated as industrial workforce because of the economic compulsions driving a modernising, industrialising nation; it was not a voluntary choice, such as the decision to join political associations in the independence movements of the earlier eras. Thirdly, rural Malay women, who were most deeply entrenched in conventional social structures, were brought into direct confrontation with the transformative possibilities of modernity, since they made up bulk of the labour force in these factories.

It is no wonder that this phenomenon is the focus of studies examining Malay women and modernity. In her groundbreaking study on rural Malay women in Japanese electronic factories, Aihwa Ong notes that ‘Malay factory women have become a focus of the expression of ambivalence about economic development and social changes in contemporary Malaysia’ (Ong 1990a: 386). Illustrating the various issues surrounding this ambivalence, Ong highlights the pitfalls and ramifications of Malay women’s engagement with modernity in this early encounter. Ong (1990b: 268) reports that while parents of these young women wanted them to work in the factories to earn the extra income for the family, they also suffered conflicting anxieties centered on the maintenance of the honour of
their daughter as good Muslim women. Thus the prospect of these women working outside the household was fraught with parental anxiety at the very outset. Also the choice to work in the factory was not merely an individual choice of the young woman but a larger imperative resting with the family. Even when consent was given, it continued to be a source of collective anxiety for the family.

The kinds of anxieties that surrounded the release of these young women into the public domain mostly centred on issues of moral impropriety — resulting from the increased freedom of movement as well as economic independence that these women now enjoyed. The new leisure time activities that these young women indulged in — such as going to the cinemas, shopping, displaying interest in fashion, wearing Western clothes and make-up were criticised as an improper use of their time and money. Malay female factory workers were stereotyped as wasteful and morally flippant (Ong 1987: 181-182).

Perhaps the greatest threat to the moral order was posed by young independent Malay women who formed relationships with non-Malay men (Ong 1990b). These anxieties about preserving Malay womanhood raised widespread moral alarm in the Malay community who castigated Malay women entering into interracial relationships as bukan Melayu (not Malay). The creation of a modern middle class Malay with economic independence and social mobility was one of the core goals of the NEP. But the social mobility of these Malay women became a bone of contention for Malays who wanted to preserve their racial integrity in the process of modernisation.

The need for Malay women to participate as wage labourers and professionals in the economy also created tension about paid work and its detrimental effect on
women’s foremost duty of maintaining a family. These young women who worked in the factories were often accused of neglecting their duties in the household as mothers and daughters. They were required to participate in the modernisation process as productive workers, but were also blamed for the breakdown of the family structure. According to Cheng, modernity in Malaysia is ‘full of contradictions: on the one hand, it attempts to delineate the boundary separating the public from the private realms (home and the world) but, on the other hand, modernity also breaches this boundary on its own terms (Cheng 2006: 136).

In addition, the increased economic freedom and social mobility of these women was seen as posing a threat to male authority and the traditional economic dominance of men (Ong 2006: 35). Ong (1987: 207) and Stivens (1994: 84) report interesting incidents of mass hysteria amongst Malay women factory workers who claimed persecution at the hands of authority figures. They interpret these moments of resistance by women workers as a protest against the exploitative capitalist order that and the disciplinary norms perpetuated by male control in the factory. Thus, the acts of resistance generated in these women were seen as posing threats to authority that rested in the hands of the men.

Not all Malay women were involved in this mass recruitment of factory labour but very few were left untouched by the industrialisation process. Many women who did not join these factories were spouses of men who were engaged in industrial labour. Malay women were introduced to the vagaries of modern industrial experience in one way or another. Even in the remote regions of the nation, the NEP’s modernisation policy touched the lives of Malay women. In an interesting example, Stivens (1996: 83) observes how the modernisation process changed the
gender norms and social structures in the remote area of Negeri Sembilan. This Minang-inhabited area followed a matrilineal system with women wielding property rights and decision-making power. But the migration of Minang men for work eroded the traditional matrilineal system and rewrote gender roles. Furthermore, the broader impact of Malay Muslim middle class-oriented policies of modernisation with their patriarchal bias put great strain on their traditional social structure of matriliny.

This regime of modernisation strategies has also not escaped the critique of conservative voices in the country. Ong (1995) reports that a young Muslim scholar not only launched a rhetoric against the apparent ill-effects of modernity, such as drug use and family conflicts, but went further to claim that the very idea of Malay women doing wage labour was dishonourable to Islam. The ‘Look East Policy’ hailed by the Prime Minister as the cornerstone of modernisation in Malaysia has been criticised by proponents of the Islamic resurgence movement as ‘unsuitable because “efficiency in exploitation” (which was Japan’s greatest success) was not a policy Muslims should emulate’ (Nair 1997: 100). Thus, the programme of modernisation and its agenda was seen as being contrary to Islamic values. The delicate balancing act involved in engaging with modernity for Malay women as paid workforce is complicated by these resurrected ideological discourses that make the place of women a sensitive issue to be monitored.

While the absorption of Malay women into the paid workforce, studied by scholars like Ong (1987; 1990a; 1990b; 2006) and Stivens (1994; 1996; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; 2006), was the major encounter of women with the challenges of modernity in the 1970s and 1980s, the debate has now progressed into another field. The dream of a Melayu Baru of the NEP agenda is now a reality in
contemporary Malaysia which has a large middle class Malay population with sedentary lives and disposable incomes. Malay women have the choice to earn an independent income or stay at home if the family has adequate means. The focus has shifted from issues surrounding women in the factory workforce to the role of women as consumers who can now afford the goods produced in those very factories. In contemporary Malaysia, popular culture has emerged as the pre-eminent site for Malay women to engage with modernity. I will elaborate this contention in the next section. I will streamline my discussion to focus on television soaps, which I believe are the most important of such sites due to the ubiquitous presence of television and popularity of the genre among Malay women.

Another site to engage with modernity: Popular culture

The last few decades have seen a proliferation of sites in which the meaning of the ‘modern’ can be located. Here, I examine the mass media and its nexus with consumer culture as a potent site for women to engage with modernity. If the ideologies of state-driven modernity, Islamic morality, Malay adat and Asian values compete in a shifting discursive terrain, the processes and the specific sites for engaging with modernity among Malay women are also multifarious.

As I have suggested, a number of discursive sites have emerged in forms of industrialisation campaigns, political movements and government policies that have linked Malay women to the process of modernity. My focus in this thesis is the opportunities for engagement with modernity which have emerged through popular culture. In this new Malaysian landscape of middle class affluence and consumerism, popular culture via media has now emerged as one of the most
important sites for Malay women to engage with modernity. Barker suggests that ‘popular culture is regarded as the meanings and practices produced by popular audiences at the moment of consumption and the study of popular culture becomes centred on the uses to which it is put’ (2000: 47). There is a plethora of studies on Malay women and politics, government policies and industrialisation. But there is very little work in the field of audience/media reception studies and cultural research into the important mediatory role of popular culture in intensifying Malay women’s experience of participating, envisioning and engaging with modernity. I will survey the few studies that are available in the field and highlight the limitations within them to contextualise my own study.

There has been some work on the discursive production of ideas of modernity amongst Malay women in popular Malay women’s magazines and films in the 1980s and 1990s. Stivens (1994: 87) reports that local women’s magazines published articles about the reinvention of Malay traditions for a modern era — childrearing practices, household décor, managing male-female interpersonal relationships, the reinvention of cuisine and so on — all designed to orient women to their role in the construction of a modern middle class family. Recent magazines, however, have moved away from a focus on the domestic to incorporate certain risqué topics more likely to be associated with Western women’s magazines. For example, the cover of (3-9 August 2007) a popular women’s magazine, *Mingguan Wanita* recently featured a young Malay woman dressed in skimpy clothes, make-up, colourful adornments and uncovered hair, a style universally recognisable as youthful, trendy and sexually attractive. The headlines on the cover announce the content in that issue: *Tolak seks, ego suami tercabar* (Refuse sex, your husband’s ego will be challenged); *Banyak cara untuk awet muda* (Many ways to retain your youth); *5 langkah buka perniagaan sendiri*
(5 steps to opening your own business); *Strategi: Panaskan suami dingin* (Strategy: Warming up a cold husband). In the magazine, there are a number of articles featuring traditional couples in classic Muslim dress and women in full *hijab* advertising consumer goods (Shop on-line!). There are advertisements for make-up and beauty products, recipes for healthy meals for the family, success stories of Muslim women, Muslim fashions, make-up tips, body slimming underwear, advice on childrearing, bridal fashions and diet regimes.

While there is a continuing religious and national emphasis on the importance of a woman’s role in the family, magazines like *Mingguan Wanita* offer a series of imagined positions in the sphere of modernity and a multiplicity of modern characters the reader can adopt in both the public and the private spheres. Women can access a range of texts through which they can construct modes of understanding and performing modernity. As Ong puts it, women in fashionable dresses and jeans alongside those in full *purdah* inhabit the same workplaces, streets, leisure centres and so on (Ong 2006: 33). Women negotiate their own way through the textual maze, even if the images are contradictory. While these studies of Malay women’s magazines highlight the role of popular culture and modernity they only examine textual representations in the magazines and do not study their reception amongst women readers.

Malay films also take up many issues relating to Malay women in a modern nation. In her study of contemporary Malaysian films, Cheng (2006) highlights how some Malay female directors engage with Malaysian modernity by representing modern female characters but avoiding any themes of sexual emancipation. They represent modern Malay women characters as progressive, independent, dressed in Western outfits, speaking both Malay and English. But
these women are relatively moderate in terms of their attitude in the practice of *adat* and Islam. As Cheng notes, ‘the women characters embrace modernity and are comfortable with it without going overboard’ (2006: 117). The modern women protagonists and their stories depict that ‘desires revolve around other crucial issues: career choices, emotional relationships with friends, family, and the potential romantic partner, and how to lead a productive, satisfactory life as a decent human being in a rapidly industrializing society’ (Cheng 2006: 118).

This nexus between popular culture and ideas of modernity is also highlighted by other scholars. In his research Kessler (1992) shows that local authorities reinvent traditional concepts and employ them through popular culture to cultivate loyalty amongst Malaysians. For example, the *Lagu Setia* (The Loyalty Song) was conceived out of the Malay’s political conflict and legitimacy crisis in the 1980s. According to Kessler (1992: 154), ‘the overall effect, then, is to create a diffuse mood holding together under the aegis of a pervasive and obligatory sense of loyalty.’ The *Lagu Setia* was consistently used in public campaigns and screened regularly on television with modern images of contemporary Malaysia (Kessler 1992: 155). Although Kessler (1992: 151) argues that *Lagu Setia* touches on a more general note of national unity and patriotism he argues that this song undoubtedly aided UMNO in maintaining its hegemony.

In his research on Malay popular culture, Kahn (2003) examines the popularity of P. Ramlee’s songs and contemporary *nasyid* songs to demonstrate the relationship between popular culture and modernity. P Ramlee is a well-known Malay singer, actor, filmmaker and composer. He mixed influences from American Jazz and Latin music to create a new genre of modern Malay music (Kahn 2003: 156). The popularity of *nasyid* in the late 1990s contributed to a significant change in the
music industry landscape bringing the influence of Islam and Arabic culture. *Nasyid* is, as Kahn defines, ‘consciously modelled on British and American boy and girl bands, typically consisting of four performers singing *a capella*-style songs and ballads’ (Kahn 2003: 153). Although *nasyid* was part of Malay culture and gained even greater popularity during the emergence of Islamic revivalist period in the 1970s, the new version of contemporary *nasyid* inspired by the Western boy band concept became a phenomenal success in contemporary Malaysia (Sarkissian 2005: 128).

What is interesting here is the ability of these two different music genres to provide a sense of modernity while building on elements of tradition. In other words, tradition has been reinvented and employed in the popular music genre to create a sense of engaging with modernity. Although P Ramlee’s songs are heavily influenced by modern American jazz and Latin, audiences are persistently reminded of the importance of tradition, particularly the sense of being loyal to God, country and nation (Kahn 2003: 162). *Nasyid* songs provide images of a global Islamic modernity mostly from the Middle East and cement the place of Islam as the most important element of Malay tradition (Kahn 2003: 158). Although Kahn’s research into popular songs helps to illustrate a new way for the Malay to engage with modernity, it does not really delve into how Malay audiences received and consumed these genres. At the same time, the study is not focussed on Malay women and their responses to these genres.

In the contemporary mediascape in Malaysia, television has emerged as a dominant technological tool bringing ideas of modernity through popular culture to people. Non-Western soap operas, which have been examined for their potential in transmitting ideas of modernity from one country to another.
(Iwabuchi 2002b; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008), have also become a dominant source for Malay women audiences to draw ideas of modernity from popular culture. However, it is important to understand what a soap opera is and the difference between soap opera as a genre, as it has been described by many scholars in the West, and non-Western soap operas. In the course of the next chapter, I define soap opera as a television genre, explaining its format, content and structure, and why it has been seen as a women-oriented television genre. I also contextualise non-Western soap operas as a television genre and its position on a map of transnational cultural flows. From there, I discuss how soap operas in general can be justified as a new site for women to engage with modernity especially in Malaysia.
This chapter seeks to situate soap operas as a popular vehicle for local audiences in contemporary Malaysia to engage with an increasingly globally oriented form of transnational modernity. I will begin this chapter by defining soap opera as a television genre, its content, format and structure. This discussion will also consider its status as a women-oriented genre. In the next section, I will justify soap opera as a site for engaging with modernity. It will argue that by acting as a vehicle for consumer culture, a site for escapism and a channel for mediated reality, soaps ‘deterritorialise’ the viewer’s imagination to a realm of transnational modernity beyond the private space and national borders.

Defining soap opera as a television genre

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

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

**Soap opera: format, content and structure**

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

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

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

However, the heterogeneous nature of soap operas does not detract from its entity as a coherent body that constitutes a genre albeit one with a broad scope. All these differences and divergences amplify our understanding of the broad scope of the genre and alert us to be mindful of the different manifestations it may take. Martín-Barbero in his study of Latin soap opera flows writes, ‘it is true that the soap opera implies rigid stereotypes in its dramatic outline and strong conditioning elements in its visual grammar, as required and reinforced by the logic of market with increasingly transnational tendencies’ (Martín-Barbero 1995: 282). As a cultural text that is so enmeshed with the mundane cultural repertoire of public domain — as what Hobson calls a ‘living form’ — these many variances are bound to be part of the genre.

As a dominant television genre, soap opera is not only a popular form in itself, it has become the paradigmatic form of storytelling on television that has shaped a plethora of other genres. According to Wittebols ‘the soap opera, or more largely, serial storytelling, has emerged as the dominant guide by which stories are told on television, regardless of whether we are looking at news, prime time programming, or the presentation of sporting contest’ (Wittebols 2004: 2). Many scholars argue that the main objective of the soap opera and its form of storytelling is to attract mass audiences and sustain their interest, which has also made it a commoditised form of television commanding millions of viewers worldwide (Allen 1995; Hobson 2003). In his study of the Australian version of popular reality TV Big Brother, Turner (2005: 420) claims that this television genre operates in a very similar way as soap opera in the way its structures stories
and depictions of ordinary life on the television screen. Foster (2004: 284) notes that the popular reality TV show *Survivor* employs the concept of the cliff-hanger narrative borrowed from soap operas in order to create suspense for the audience every week.

**Soap opera as a women-oriented genre**

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

The bulk of content that is portrayed in soap operas — family issues, neighbourhood and romance — are societal issues that are of interest to women (Bowles 2000: 122). The feminine attributes associated with such matters depicted on these soaps can be explained as a gender norm acquired through cultural conditioning. In an early study on the famous British soap *Crossroads*, Charlotte Brunsdon counts ‘the culturally constructed skills of femininity — sensitivity, perception, intuition and the necessary privileging of the concerns of personal life’ as attributes which are required to appreciate the content of the series (Brunsdon 1981: 36). Thus, soaps require the viewers to have ‘a set of knowledge and skills normally associated with them in patriarchal culture’ (Mumford 1995: 45). It is through these feminine competencies acquired in everyday life in a patriarchal culture that Geraghty notes that women are able to decode ‘every word and gesture in order to understand its emotional meaning’ and
derive pleasure, which maybe lost to male audiences who are not acculturated in such a manner (Geraghty 1991: 43). Norms of gender in society are structured in such a way that issues associated with private lives of romance, interpersonal relationships, families are invariably deemed to be women’s issues. Fiske also defines soap operas as programs based on ‘women’s matters, that is, as a domain where patriarchy grants women a position of some power’ (Fiske 1987: 181-182).

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

Soap operas emulate the narratives of melodrama and romance that evolved with sentimental novels for women readers in the nineteenth century. According to Geraghty, melodrama on soaps is presented through ‘the close-ups of faces, of important objects, the deliberate movement of a character across a room, the lingering of the camera on a face at the end of a scene’ (Geraghty 1991: 30). Ko also notes that Japanese soaps use such cinematographic techniques to heighten the poignancy of a scene or underscore fluctuations of emotion (Ko 2004: 117). Melodrama and romance have become staples of popular culture aimed at women. As Gledhill notes:
Since soap opera is known to have been devised to reach female audiences and to deploy subject matter designated ‘feminine,’ namely family and personal relationships and a focus on emotion, it is assumed that such concerns are ‘melodramatic’ and in a circular process that melodrama is somehow a ‘woman’s’ cultural form (Gledhill 1992: 106).

In addition, there are ideological discourses embedded in the soap operas that revolve around the roles women inhabit in ordinary life. Tania Modleski notes that most soap operas have narrative structures that focus on the image of the ‘ideal mother’, where ‘soaps convince women that their highest goal is to see their families united and happy, while consoling them for their inability to bring about familial harmony (Modleski 1979: 14). This in turn generates pleasure for women by creating identifiable role models for their own lives as mothers or potential mothers.

Another point that also helps to support this contention of soap operas as a woman-oriented genre is the timeslot in which they tend to be scheduled. The afternoon slot in which most soap operas are broadcast is assumed to be a time when the rest of the family is outside of the home, ‘when women form the bulk of the available audience’ and thus ‘women are likely to be in the majority among soap watchers’ (Bowles 2000: 122).

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

**Soap opera as a site for engaging with modernity**

Soap operas are a ubiquitous part of everyday life for audiences who imagine distant locales, form understandings of ordinary life and larger cultural trends through the stories and images propagated by the genre. Many previous soaps scholars associate these functions with the notion of modernity (Ang 1985; Chua 2004; Geraghty 1991; Hobson 2003; Iwabuchi 2004a). I endorse this view and argue here that as a vehicle for consumer culture, outlet for escapism and a platform of mediated reality, soaps generate a sense of modernity. These three aspects underpin my argument about soap opera genre as a potent site for engaging with modernity because they expand the viewers’ imagination beyond the constraints of their personal lives, physical locales and cultural boundaries. Giddens writes, ‘modern organisations are able to connect the local and the global
in ways which would have been unthinkable in more traditional societies and in so doing routinely affect the lives of many million of people’ (Giddens 1990: 20). The following section will elaborate my argument about how these three aspects function to deterritorialise imagination and make soaps a paradigmatic site for women to engage with modernity.

1. Vehicle of consumer culture

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

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

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

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

Just like these soap operas in the Western world, their non-Western counterparts are also deeply enmeshed with consumer culture (Iwabuchi 2008: 245). In the Latin American countries, a version of romance dramas called telenovelas also began in the 1960s under the sponsorship of detergent manufacturers like Lever Brothers and Colgate Palmolive and now continues to be a vehicle for sponsorships of a plethora of consumer products. A parallel development in the telenovelas from commercial breaks to narrative emphasis on consumer culture in the program has also taken place. Product placement within the soaps is quite a popular trend in telenovelas where consumer goods are portrayed as complementing the modern lifestyles of its characters (Mattelart 1990: 47). The main attraction of a genre called trendy drama in Japan (urban lifestyle and fashion-based drama targeted at youth audiences) is the conspicuous consumption of lifestyle products creating ideals of fashion and glamour for its viewers. These trendy dramas with their consumerist focus ‘truly forge a new life style for women in modern days with a Japanese situation, representing urban life and consumption (sic)’ (Matsuda and Higashi 2006: 19). These trendy dramas are also immensely popular in other parts of Asia where audiences seek to emulate the fashionable images of the Japanese characters. For example, Ko reports: ‘Japanese idol dramas have emerged as an important phenomenon in Taiwan … [and have] impacted the local life style, formation of the youth subculture, consumption patterns, colloquial speech, and even urban planning’ (Ko 2004: 109).
Another element that aids the promotion of consumer culture in soap operas is the urban settings in which these soaps are invariably based. In fact, an urban lifestyle seems to be indispensable for depictions of a modern lifestyle fuelled by consumerism. As Leung notes, urban lifestyle is depicted as the key to modernity with its ‘appeal of novelty’ where ‘the city is portrayed as full of possibilities, where the countryside is seen as backward, sleepy, and only for failures’ (Leung 2002: 71). Iwabuchi says that urban lifestyle provides an indispensable visual structure to the series of *trendy dramas*, where the cityscape of Tokyo is depicted as the playground where all consumerist desires are fulfilled and pleasures of a modern life are achieved (Iwabuchi 2004a: 2). Explaining the popularity of this same genre in audiences outside Japan in Taiwan, Ko (2004: 123) says that it is this image of Tokyo, as the most progressive and vibrant city in Asia which is idealised by its Taiwanese viewers as the epitome of modernity. Thus it appears that the ‘city’ has been identified as a space to engage with modernity, where ‘city is a space in which modernism happens’ (Lash 1990: 31).

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

2. Platform for escapism

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

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

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

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

With their typical themes, soaps produced in one location can be watched by audiences elsewhere, without requiring much cultural proficiency, except for minute adjustments. As carriers of cultural content from one place to another, soaps become vehicles for introducing cultural trends and lifestyles to local audiences from foreign regions. For example, *Dallas* propagated aspirations for a middle class American lifestyle for non-Western viewers in the 1980s even if they had never visited America. Recently, soaps from other regions like Japan, Korea and Latin America have provided new images of urban middle class lifestyle in Asia. Lin and Tong reports, ‘the representations of cosmopolitan city life, individual pursuits of free love, social justice and modern consumerist desire can go beyond national boundaries, attracting viewers in many part of Asia and creating a shared desire among them’ (Lin and Tong 2008: 102). Women may also become familiar with issues that might be foreign within their cultural context. One’s sense of habitat is not constricted by immediate physical location but latches on to the imaginative spaces of the soap opera. For example, Lin and Tong claim that soap audiences in Asia ‘enjoy the fantasy elements as both possible and plausible since the story happens in a different city in Asia and thus offers some room for imagination or fantasy’ (Lin and Tong 2008: 94). Particularly in some rapidly developing Asian countries like Malaysia, women are
still restricted to the domestic domain despite the liberalisation of economic and social structure, and media like soap operas become an outlet for engagement with the wider world for these women. These women’s view of modernity is shaped vicariously through the images in soap operas that have assumed a ubiquitous place in everyday life.

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

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

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

3. Channel for mediated reality

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

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

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

Opening up a space for such issues, soap operas take on the role of a mediatory tool that can influence and inform notions of everyday life for women audiences. As Hobson points out ‘its stories must be the stories of the audience and it’s predominate emotion must be that of recognition…of the characters and…stories they tell’ (Hobson 2003: 172). Hobson, however, is partly right because some studies in Asian countries show that along with recognising or identifying some elements, viewers also tend to distance themselves from some other elements in the soap operas (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). Audiences are confronted with the moral dilemma of accepting the ‘same’ or going along with ‘different’ as portrayed in the soap. For example, identification with a strong female character in a soap opera may inspire a woman to be more assertive in her life. On the other hand, dis-identification could provoke her to condemn such behaviour as improper and unfeminine. It is the playful interpretation of the stories of everyday reality that allows women to form such judgments in their own lives that forms the pleasure of watching soaps. This may enable them to question, reflect and form opinions about their life against the images and stories from the soaps. In his research on Hong Kong soaps in Guangzhou, China, Fung suggests that middle class audiences exercised such a critical attitude in making judgments about the depiction of everyday life in those soaps. He notes:

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

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

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

Another aspect of soaps as stories of everyday life that contributes to making it a source of mediated reality is that they often choose topical issues circulating within a society. For example, the British soaps *EastEnders* introduced issues of homosexuality in the 1980s when gay people, AIDS and same sex marriages were becoming an issue in popular discourse (Geraghty 1991; Hobson 2003). Other media like newspapers may overtly construct notions of reality and happenings in the world, soap operas also do so in their own way. These soap operas also provide repertoires of images and social discourses that influence popular perception of larger social issues. Soaps help amplify the viewer’s sense of inhabiting a world beyond the immediate vicinity of one’s surroundings, who must cope with the larger issues of a society and develop opinions about them. The issues articulated in soap operas endeavour to be current and contemporary, making the audiences feel connected with the larger society they inhabit. As Hobson notes, soaps ‘running contemporaneously with the experience of the audience’ whether it is to mark some holidays, change in season, trickle into the mediated reality by virtue of their contemporaneity with the social lives of the audiences at large (Hobson 2003: 34). And the long running, continuous storyline of soaps to which the audiences tune in on a regular basis, further amplifies this sense of being connected to a world outside their own personal lives. Circumscribed within the boundaries of her domestic life, a woman may not have direct experience of many societal issues, but soaps provide an outlet for her to engage with wider society. As Hobson notes, ‘they can share in understanding it
in greater depth by experiencing the representation in televisual form’ (Hobson 2003: 142).

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

Popular culture is a ‘crucial domain’ of modern life which is often used to channel the aims and projects of building a new regime, in this case one of modernity. Within this scenario, women have a particular affinity with soap operas and this genre of popular culture has shaped women’s notions of their roles and ideas of modern life. In this chapter, I have outlined the reasons why women are drawn to the genre and how it communicates ideas of modernity to women. In the next chapter, I will further discuss how non-Western soap operas have emerged on the Malaysian television landscape and provoked the controversy over its impact on the state’s vision of Malay modernity.
CHAPTER 4: NON-WESTERN SOAP OPERAS AND ALTERNATIVE MODERNITY IN MALAYSIA

In this chapter, I discuss the importance of non-Western soaps as a site for Malay women to imagine forms of transnational modernity. I will begin this chapter with an overview of the development of Malaysian television and trace the rise of non-Western soaps. While the government initiated the policy of importing non-Western content to offset Western influence, the astounding popularity of non-Western soaps has caused controversy. How can we explain the shift in popularity towards non-Western soaps, which has nearly obliterated the presence of Western soaps? I will close this chapter with a further discussion of Malay women’s viewing habits and the controversy it has produced in the Malaysian public sphere. I will highlight the conflict between the representations of modernity in the non-Western soaps and the state’s vision of Malay modernity.

Overview of the development of Malaysian television

The first broadcasting station in Malaysia was established in 1963 under the supervision of a governmental committee (Karthigesu 1994a: 5). Following the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) as its model, the broad purpose of this television station was to create ‘the right ambience for development’ to complement the state’s projects of nation building and modernisation (Hashim 1989: 74). This was rapidly followed by the launch of television channels RTM1 in 1965 and RTM2 in 1969. As state run corporations, the RTM television channels were closely allied with government policies (Anuar and Kim 1996).

In the 1980s, television broadcasting in Malaysia entered a new era, as the new privatisation policy de-regulated the sector and freed it from the sole control of the
state. As a result, the national mediascape saw the shift in television channels from state-subsidised agencies to profit-making corporations. TV3 was one of the first private television channels to be launched in 1983. Private television channels brought drastic changes in the content of the programs, viewership trends and the structure of the industry. They introduced popular television content in order to attract the maximum audience, retain a competitive edge in the market and generate advertising revenue for the channel. Badarudin notes that, ‘privatisation and deregulation of the national television system in Malaysia have produced the commercialisation and commodification of television content and its audience’ (Badarudin 1997: 149). With the growing success of profit-oriented corporations such as TV3, government television stations such as RTM began to realise the importance of being a competitive participant in the market and screening content that would be popular among audiences. However, because home-grown media production was not fully developed, TV3 purchased and screened many imported television programs from outside Malaysia (Wahab 2006: 174).

Today, television broadcasting is a competitive field with a plethora of private television channels from within Malaysia and a host of multinational satellite television channels. There are six free-to-air television stations — two state-owned (RTM1 and RTM2) and four other stations (TV3, NTV7, 8TV and TV9) owned by the Media Prima Bhd. Group — all of which account for 11.2 million television viewers everyday (Media Prima 2007). The penetration of radio and television across the whole population is more than 95%, with almost all Malaysian households having access to satellite and free-to-air television channels (Pawanteh 2004). More than 5.5 million households in Malaysia own television sets (Ali 2005).
During the 1960s and 70s, the earliest phase of television broadcasting in Malaysia, a variety of primetime Western series like *Mannix*, *The Odd Couple* and *Streets of San Francisco* were reported as being the most popular programs. Many factors contributed to this trend. Firstly, these programs were favoured by the broadcasting stations because of the production cost; it was cheaper to import foreign programs and broadcast them on local stations. Secondly, the few locally produced programs on air were of poor quality and did not attract audiences (Karthigesu 1994). Thirdly, the popularity of these Western series and serials was related to the demographic of the viewership at that time. The audience in those early decades mainly consisted of educated, westernised, urban middle class who could afford television sets (Karthigesu 1998: 50).

Given this set of circumstances, soap viewing was dominated by Western content mainly produced and sourced from the United States of America. After the privatisation period from 1980s to the 1990s, American programs like *Dallas*, *Baywatch* and *Beverly Hills 90210* continued this trend on the local free-to-air television stations in Malaysia (Karthigesu 1991; 1994b; 1998). The popularity of American soaps continues to this day. Contemporary American serials like *Desperate Housewives*, *Ghost Whisperer*, *Ugly Betty* and *Prison Break* are readily available through satellite television stations (Ee-Tan 2006).

Even though the proportion of the local audience following these Western soaps has always been relatively small, there have always been critics of these programs who criticise the Western influence as being detrimental to Malay cultural integrity (Karthigesu 1991: 104). Ong (1995: 176) reports that there were complaints made by Islamic clerics in the 1980s that American television
programs were detrimental to Islamic values. Popular Western series in the 1990s like *21 Jump Street* and *L.A. Law* were denounced for their overtly sexual content and references to homosexuality (Karthigesu 1991: 105). This fear of the corruptive potential of Western soaps even led to discussions in the media, political gatherings and parliamentary sessions. Government voices, particularly the UMNO, denounced Western soaps as being detrimental to the cultural integrity, development and modernisation of Malaysian citizens (Bernama 2004; 2006a; Karthigesu 1991).

Paranoia about the degeneracy of Western soaps led the government to encourage the production of local soaps, documentaries and musical contests to offset the Western influence, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, RTM produced a local Malay soap opera *PJ*, imitating *Dallas’* format, narrative style and content (Karthigesu 1994). If *Dallas* is the story of a well-to-do family in the upper middle class suburb of Southfork Ranch in Dallas, Texas, USA, then *PJ* focuses on the lives of families from a new modern city called *PJ* or Petaling Jaya in Selangor, Malaysia. But these local soaps, which often had repetitive themes and poor production values, did not succeed in drawing local audiences away from Western soaps. Television channels still continued to be dominated by Western content (Hartati 1998 cited in Wahab 2006).

**The emergence of non-Western soaps on Malaysian television**

In another attempt to offset Western dominance in television content, the Malaysian Ministry of Information also encouraged the screening of soap operas produced by newly emerging television producers from non-Western countries. Given the inability of local producers to create viable content, non-Western soaps
were seen as an easy source of content that would offset the Western influence on audiences. As early as 1983, the state run channel Television Malaysia broadcast a soap opera from Brazil called *Isaura*. However, this program was terminated, due to technical difficulties in finding a compatible timeslot (John, Damis and Chelvi 2003a).

Efforts were continued by the state run channel NTV7 in the 1990s and it became the main broadcaster for all these non-Western soaps (Wahab 2006: 132). The channel was launched in 1998 by the government as a commercial enterprise to attract their share of advertising revenue and audience which was dominated by private and satellite television channels. NTV7 was a success. Non-Western soaps were a hit. Latin American soaps like *Maria Mercedes* attracted 300,000 viewers everyday and others like *Mis Tres Hermanas* and *Betty Yo Soy La Fea* were even more successful, with up to 500,000 viewers tuning in on a daily basis to NTV7 (John, Damis and Chelvi 2003a; 2003c).

Under the political umbrella of the ‘Look East Policy’ launched in the early 1980s, the government also advised the state run Television Malaysia to import and broadcast more television programs from Japan and South Korea. The government advised broadcasters to import programs from these countries, so that Japanese and Korean attitudes and ways of life could be brought into public and private life in Malaysia. There was a commonly-held perception among Malaysians that Korean and Japanese people were industrious and enterprising people in the economic sphere, yet morally conservative and traditional in their outlook. The government sought to encourage the Japanese and Korean people as a viable role model for Malays on the path to modernisation. In the 1980s, Japanese soaps such as *Oshin* and *Rin Hanne Konma* were dubbed into Malay and
broadcast on local television. The stories depicted in these soaps were different from the consumerist middle class American lifestyle of *Dallas*. For example, the period drama *Oshin* tells the story of a young Japanese peasant girl who grows up and experiences different challenges in her life (Hussien 2001). Hashim (1989: 125) notes that RTM and TV3 also introduced a special afternoon slot called *Chinese Belt*, which showed many soaps from Hong Kong and China to attract local Chinese-speaking audiences in Malaysia.

The promotion of non-Western soaps had a significant effect on the viewing predilections of the audiences. Japanese soap like *Rin Hane Konma* was ranked ninth among the nation’s ten most popular TV programs (Kyodo News International 1988) and usurped the place of American soaps like *Dallas*. Consequently, there was a huge influx of soaps from Japan in the mid-1990s till early 2000s. Soaps like *Beautiful Life*, *Concerto* and *Power Office Girl* commanded high ratings and some were even shifted to the prime time slot at night (Hussien 2001).

The introduction of non-Western soaps in Malaysia began in the 1980s as a strategy to offset Western influence. But now non-Western soaps have completely overtaken other genres as the most popular television genre with astronomical viewership ratings, particularly among Malay women, who have been identified as the main audience of this genre (Bidin 2003; Hamzah 2006; John, Damis and Chelvi 2003a). In spite of the fact that these non-Western soaps are not dubbed into Malay language and need to be watched with subtitles, the appetite for non-Western soaps continues to grow among local audiences. Given the high literacy rate across the population in contemporary Malaysia, non-Western soaps are not even dubbed into Malay but shown with subtitles thereby making the broadcasting
process easier and the programs more profitable for television channels (Hussien 2001). The development of satellite television stations has also helped the free flow of content from disparate locations and the large number of private television channels have caught on to the trend of screening non-Western soaps started by government channels (Wahab 2006). Trade agreements and close cultural ties with the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) have also contributed to this deluge of non-Western soaps from locations like Japan, Korea and Taiwan (Wahab 2006: 183). The government actively promotes such cultural interchange as importation of television soaps to augment its broader socio-economic agenda under the AFTA (Hassan and Ahmad 2006).

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

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

Another important source of non-Western soaps is Latin America. Although Latin American soaps do not fit neatly into the slot of the generic non-Western soap — due to elements of relatively open depiction of sexual matters and their historical association with European culture and language — it is important to understand why this status has been granted to Latin American soaps. The justification made by the Malaysian authorities is that Latin American nations inhabit a similar space of cultural evolution of rapid modernisation and economic development as Malaysia. Latin American soaps not only tell stories that Malaysians can relate to but they offer content with a more balanced Western influence (Bernama 2007b). In fact, authorities have argued that Latin soaps are not in contradiction to local culture and they fit within the broadcast guidelines of the Malaysian television (Bernama 2007b). As per the Malaysian broadcast code and ethics, any foreign content must not go against the vision and sensitivity of the multicultural Malaysian nation (MCMC 1998). Latin American soaps are also accepted by the Malay audiences for portraying stories that share similarities with Asian cultural norms. Lau reports that habitual followers of Colombian soap, *Yo Soy Betty La
Fea (Betty, The Ugly) are avid followers of this popular soap because ‘the culture and stories of these countries are similar to Asian society’ (Lau 2003). Themes like family issues, parent-child relationships and marital love pervade non-Western soaps, whether they are from Asia or Latin America, with lesser emphases on individualism or sexual intrigue as in most Western soaps.

After the abortive attempt by the state to produce local soaps in the 1980s, the phenomenon of Latin American soaps really took off in Malaysia with the deregulation of the industry in the early 2000s. The Venezuelan soap called Maria Mercedes on NTV7, was screened all weekdays from Monday to Friday and attracted more than 600,000 viewers per episode (Farinordin 2003). The success of Maria Mercedes encouraged NTV7 to broadcast many other Latin American soaps like Mis Tres Hermanes (My Three Sisters) and La Usurpadora (The Pretender), Yo Soy Betty La Fea (I Am Betty the Ugly One) and Juana La Virgen (Juana's Miracle). Ratings for these soaps were high, between 400,000 to 900,000 viewers for each episode (Farinordin 2003). The popularity of Latin American soap operas also attracted the interest of other local television networks like RTM and TV3. The afternoon slot on RTM which showed a series of Spanish-language soap operas like El Amor No Es Como Lo Pintan (Love Is Not How People Make It out to be) and Por Tu Amor (For Your Love) attracted 1.3 million viewers. The climax to this phenomenon of popularity of Latin American soaps came in 2002, when TV3 aired the Mexican family soap Rosalinda claimed a record viewership 2.6 million viewers per episode. The lead actress of the soap Thalia who is also a pop singer, became a star in Malaysia and her theme song Ay-Amor, Rosalinda became a popular song.
Although Korean and Latin American soaps can be said to have been the most popular programs among audiences in the early 2000s, soaps from Indonesia currently claim the highest place in the popularity ratings. From 2006 Indonesian soap operas, locally known as Sinetron, were broadcast on most local television channels and almost wiped out any remnants of local Malaysian soaps which had survived the earlier onslaught of foreign non-Western soaps. The TV3 afternoon slot, which screened the Indonesian soap Bawang Merah Bawang Putih (Shallots and Garlic) from early 2006, attracted an astronomical viewership of about four million viewers per episode (Saharani 2007). The fantastical elements and riveting storyline based on supernatural themes attracted the audiences in droves. This figure is believed to be the highest rating for any soap opera in Malaysia. Many reasons are given for the popularity of Indonesian soaps — from cultural proximity to good production values. But it has also been noted that it is the supernatural storyline of the soap based on local, indigenous folklore shared by people in Malaysia and Indonesia which has attracted local audiences in Malaysia. This is a subject that was never touched in the storyline of soaps from other regions and even banned on Malaysian television for many years (Bernama 2007a; Hamzah 2006; Saharani 2007). This trend of ‘supernatural’ soaps from Indonesia continued with Bukan Cinderella (Not Cinderella) and Lontin, broadcast by Media Prima through its associate television station TV3. Apart from these supernatural soaps, Indonesian soaps of romance and family life like Ratapan Anak Tiri (Grief of the step children), Malim Kundang, Romantika Shanghai (Shanghai Romance) and Kenapa ada Cinta? (Why is love?) were broadcast on RTM. Kawin Muda (Early Marriage) was aired on a daily basis from Monday to Friday (Utusan Malaysia, 2008). In fact, the popularity of Indonesian soaps has reached such an astronomical height that ASTRO, a local satellite
television station, introduced a 24 hour Sinetron channel called Aruna which currently screens an array of Indonesian soap operas such as Maha Pengasih (The Most Blessed), Mewarnai Langit (Painting the Sky), Akibat Banyak Gaul (Too many relationships), Perempuan (Women), Samson Betawi, Roman Picisan (Lousy Romance), Suami-Suami Takut Istri (Husbands Afraid of Wives) and Titipan Ilahi (Gift from God) (Utusan Malaysia 2008).

Non-Western soap operas on the map of transnational cultural flows

This influx of soap operas from non-Western producers in the Asian and Latin American regions on local television channels also points to the complexity of cultural flows in the contemporary world. It attests to the realignment of cultural tastes and allegiances and rejects an image of a unilinear flow of content from the West to the rest. Chua and Iwabuchi (2008), Thussu (2007), Iwabuchi (2002a; 2004a) and Iwabuchi, Muecke and Thomas (2004) amongst others have argued that the popularity of non-Western soaps across diverse locations illustrates the multipolar flows of popular culture that are increasingly decentering the centre/periphery model and instead creating a picture of a transnational web. Japanese and Korean soaps are watched in many Southeast Asian countries including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines (Chua 2004; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Iwabuchi 2002; 2004; Suh, Kwon and Choi 2006).

The transnational flow of soap operas also shows the capacity of non-Western locations to produce content that can not only compete with the traditional heavyweights like the USA, but beat them at their own game. Western soaps are losing in this competition with local programs in regions which have developed a robust production capacity. In their study of Dallas in Japan, Liebes, Katz and
Sumiko show how *Dallas* lost audiences to locally produced content of ‘the Japanese version of the soap opera, the so-called home drama’ (Liebes, Katz & Sumiko 1993: 131-132). According to Silj and Alvarado, ‘In Peru … when the public was offered a choice between an imported programme and a popular entertainment programme rooted in the country’s own tradition, it opted for its own culture’ (Silj and Alvarado 1988: 38).

Further, non-Western soaps seem to possess the same kind of mobility and universal appeal claimed by American soaps like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* as they are easily able to transcend cultural and geographical borders. Non-Western soaps offer a new global-local representation of domesticated and hybrid modernity. Brazilian soaps or *telenovelas* are watched by a large audience from more than a hundred countries in this world (Allen 1995: 3). The famous Brazilian soap opera called *La Esclava Isaura* (Isaura the Slave) has transcended geographical and political borders. To give an example it claims about 450 million people in China as avid viewers of the program (Allen 1995). The Mexican transnational media giant, *Televisa* has successfully exported Mexican soaps to more than fifty countries in the world including Korea, Russia and Turkey (Allen 1995). Non-Western soaps have even reached some countries in Europe and America (AFP, 2007; Baguiero 2002; Iwabuchi 2002a; Martinez 2005). The aggressive marketing strategy of these Mexican and Brazilian television production companies with their sights set on drawing audiences beyond national borders speaks of the vigorous energy of non-Western soap industries. They reflect the complex flows of transnational cultural texts in a multipolar world (Allen 1995).

As I noted earlier, soap operas have not only infiltrated many other aesthetic variants like reality television, talk show and documentary, its generic format is
also remanufactured in locations across the world. Following the cultural dominance of the West in mass-media driven popular culture in the early decades, the proliferation of media like television across the world has created new channels for flow of transnational cultural texts. In an environment of rapid proliferation of communication technology and globalising economies, many locations have the production capacity to cater to local audiences. Non-Western countries have managed to construct new hybrid cultural texts that synthesise generic formats of texts taken from the West, with local ingredients. They seem to posses ‘the DNA, the recipe and the technology for invigorating local television industries’ (Keane, Fung and Moran 2007: 10). In this scene the most prolific growth has been the non-Western soaps that have seemingly come from nowhere to develop rapidly across regions. In his work of soap opera consumption in the world, Allen claims that ‘it was not US producers who benefited most from the increased demand for serial programming in the 1980s…rather, [it was] Latin American producers, particularly Brazil’s TV-Globo and Mexico Televisa’ (Allen 1995: 13).

We must also be mindful of the differences of soaps from different locales, as production settings and audience orientations in varying cultural contexts can create markedly different products. In this section, I will elaborate some features that distinguish non-Western soap from their Western counterparts. While the term soap opera is often used to refer to daytime serial dramas in America, non-Western soaps are not confined by this definition. On the contrary, many non-Western soaps are broadcast at the primetime night slot in many non-Western locations like Malaysia. They are also targetted at a more heterogeneous audience composed of women with their families including children rather than the typical housewife audience of the afternoon slot of Western soaps.
Allen (1997: 112) even makes a broad generalisation about the difference in the serialisation structure that differentiates many non-Western soaps from the typical Western variants. According to him, most soap operas produced in the Western world typically apply open-ended storytelling, whereas non-Western soaps from Latin America and Asia mostly have closed-ended narratives. While Western soaps may have narratives ending with ambiguous meanings that leave the possibility for many resolutions, the direction in which the story culminates has to be made obvious and clear in non-Western soaps. Furthermore, most Western soaps are conceived as long running series, and if successful, may continue to run for decades. But many non-Western soaps may not necessarily follow that convention. For example, the Japanese soap genre called homu dorama (home drama) may share many generic characteristics of a soap opera, but Harvey (1988: 135) argues that it is not a soap opera because it is not long-running. Many other genres of Japanese television dramas like trendy drama are in fact conceived as short serial designed to last for a few episodes (Iwabuchi 2002a: 145). Again, while the soap in the Western world focuses on community (Neighbours, Eastenders, Home and Away, Crossroads), most of the Japanese home dramas are family-centred and maintain the space of the home as centre of that fictional world. All Japanese home dramas are set inside the house as the main background. Although Japanese trendy dramas are often set in the workplace, the focus of its story is interpersonal relationships. Although Western soaps like Dallas and Dynasty show family relationships, they focus on elites (rarely found in the Japanese home dramas) and their social life.

Thus, a prolific industry of soaps has grown in non-Western locations in the last few decades. The telenovela from the Latin Americas is a version of soap opera
with themes of romantic drama and commands large audiences across the world (Thussu 2007: 25). In Asia, popular television serials produced in Japan, South Korea, Philippines, and Indonesia all retain the typical format of soap operas of seriality, romance, family themes, melodrama and suspense (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Iwabuchi 2002a; 2004a; 2004b). These non-Western soaps are now the most popular form of television viewing amongst women audiences in Malaysia and act as the major node of consumption of popular culture for Malay women. This point about soap operas as a window to modernity via popular culture holds a lot of significance in Malaysia where women may not have access to many other avenues for such engagement.

**Malay women’s viewing habits**

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

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

The bulk of the population which used to prefer Western content was urban and educated. Now that television sets are easily affordable and the penetration of the medium is more than 95% in all households in Malaysia, the audience is not only more heterogeneous but it is dominated by the population in small towns and
villages (MCMC 2001; Pawanteh 2004). The popularity of non-Western soaps may also be explained by the possibility of technical or creative superiority of non-Western producers, who have mastered the art of making soaps better than their American counterparts. For example, the copyright for the series *Ugly Betty* was bought by an American company and remade in the USA (Rohter 2007). This shows the rich creative talent in these new locales.

**Malay women and non-Western soaps: The lure of proximate modernity**

This brief timeline of the surging popularity of non-Western soaps shows that the genre has gone from strength to strength in garnering local Malay audiences. Elements of consumer culture, urban lifestyle and focus on ordinary life issues (Hamzah 2006; Saharani 2007) are part and parcel of the genre. That leaves the issue of what differentiates non-Western soaps from their Western counterparts and the reasons for their popularity. Built on formulaic storylines and lowbrow content, soap operas are ‘revered by fans, reviled by some critics’ (Hobson 2003: xi) and labelled as ‘women’s trash’ (Allen 1995: 3). But this does not seem to mitigate the passion of women audiences for this genre. In Malaysia, soap operas, particularly those produced in non-Western locations like Korea, Japan, Indonesia and the Latin Americas are hugely popular amongst Malay women audiences. What makes non-western soaps a unique object for Malay women? What are the most favoured elements of a sense of modernity derived from non-Western soaps?

It is possible that the new fad, as the government authorities like to call it, is a symptom of disaffection from the dominance of American content (Bernama 2007b; John, Davis and Chelvi 2003a). Governmental authorities like the Malaysian Ministry of Information describe non-western soaps as a ‘passing
culture’ and pin this as a trend that is ‘fuelled by viewer disaffection for the standard American fare on offer now’ (John, Damis and Chelvi 2003a).

In this new landscape of middle class affluence and consumerism, popular culture via the media has emerged as one of the most important sites for Malay women to engage with modernity. These non-Western soap operas are the principal nodes of consumption of popular culture for the demographic of Malay women that I have chosen for my study. There are a number of reasons why non-Western soap operas allow its viewers to imagine modernity. Firstly, they are manageable. The stories in non-Western soaps are panned by critics as lowbrow, simplistic, repetitive or melodramatic, but those are the very features which enable audiences to latch on with an ease of engagement and immediacy of identification (John, Damis and Chelvi 2003b). John, Damis, and Chelvi (2003c) list the typical features of the soap opera genre that may be found in these non-Western soaps: a beautiful heroine; a handsome, somewhat rakish male hero; a liberal sprinkling of issues of interest to women audiences, from family feuds, vengeful rivals, and nosy neighbours, to corruption, social class and poverty. This typical content of the non-Western soap opera genre not only provides Malay women with issues of interest but the melodramatic plotline keeps them on tenterhooks and draws them to tune into the soaps on a daily basis to follow the suspense (Bernama 2007a; 2007b).

Popular non-Western soaps provide a fictional female-centred world of romance and family in which women’s experiences are privileged and valued. Issues relating to modern middle class family life form the content of these non-Western soaps and this has been identified as the main source of attraction for Malay women audiences (John, Damis and Chelvi 2003b). Most of the popular non-
Western soaps from Japan, Korea, Latin America, Taiwan, Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia provide similar themes, stories and characters (Bernama 2007b). But it is the depiction of modern middle class life in non-Western settings as well as a tinge of foreign allure that attracts women to the non-Western soaps. They avidly watch the melodramatic narratives of middle class family life in foreign locales which play out in these soaps.

Along with domestic issues of interest to women, it is the allure of consumer culture — of viewing cultural products and urban lifestyles from foreign locations that also underpin the popularity of these non-Western soap operas (Chua 2004; 2008). These non-Western soaps provide a sense of modernity with aspirational images of consumer culture and modern lifestyle from these foreign locations (Hamzah 2006; Saharani 2007). Soap is a space for imagination that creates vicarious pleasure and aspirational values for audiences (Ang, 1985; Brown, 1994; Spence, 2005). Even if middle class Malay women do not live in mansions, buy expensive clothes or engage in romantic entanglements, soaps give them a chance to engage vicariously with these pleasures of modernity. These foreign non-Western soaps have more positive portrayals of women, a fantastical storyline that seeks to entertain viewers and provide aspirational images. They familiarise local Malay audiences with foreign cultural trends and prompt desire for foreign goods. These soaps provide a platform for imagining forms of transnational modernity in contemporary Malaysia. For Malay women the borders often become real and they choose to cross into these non-Western locales. Chua (2004; 2008) also says that the sense of foreignness of location, clothes and urban icons in these soaps have constructed consumerist desire among audiences. Many Malays chose to visit South Korea for vacations after watching Korean soaps. Tourism packages are promoted on the grounds of mixing the appeal of the exotic
with the familiar comforts of home. When it was reported that a large number of Malaysians travelled to South Korea in the wake of the popularity of Winter Sonata (Silva 2003), many travel agencies began to offer halal packages to cater to this growing market. In this way, Malay culture itself is re-territorialised and relocated in the mobile space of tourism. Korean culture returns to Malaysia in reconfigured forms, as dubbed theme songs and halal kimchi (Bakar 2010; Farinordin 2003).

While the aspirational desires of actually visiting and experiencing foreign locations are a direct result of the consumerist desire for tourism, the more insidious effect of soaps is that the idea of the place dissolves into an ethereal imaginative landscape created by the fantasy world of the soaps. Even if most Malay women may not be able to physically visit foreign countries, their minds are saturated with the images of the foreign locales depicted in the soaps. Tomlinson suggests that the term ‘non-places’ is a key feature of modernity where ‘modernity replaces real localities with non-places’ (Tomlinson 1999: 108). The experience of ‘non-places’ is that one aspires to inhabit not a precise location of a city, for example Tokyo, but a generic locale with a utopic cityscape and urban sophistication created in the fantasy image of the soap. The creation of ‘non-places’, according to Tomlinson is certainly an aspect of deterriotrialized culture (Tomlinson 1999: 111). While places may have had a distinct identity in the past, in media products like soaps their actual physical and historical identities are blurred. The audiences are seduced by the ubiquitous images of urbanity of a generic metropolis. Malay women express their desire for visiting Tokyo not because of its status as ‘distinctive’ Tokyo but a sophisticated megapolis of skyscrapers and fashionable people. The depiction of urban landscape in non-Western soaps provides an opportunity for Malay women who live in the remote
village area to enjoy an imagined experience of life in big cities. They might also associate the construction of urban living in Seoul, Tokyo and Jakarta with cities in Malaysia. For them ‘the city is portrayed as full of possibilities, where the countryside is seen as backward, sleepy and only for failures’ (Leung 2002: 71). However, without disagreeing with Tomlinson’s idea of ‘non-places’, I also want to add that just because Malay women experience non-places through non-Western soaps they are still attached to their local Malay culture even though their imagination might be deterritorialised.

A sense of cultural proximity with non-Western countries especially Korea, Japan and to some extent Latin America, also plays a role in cementing the popularity of non-Western soap operas. In comparison to Western soaps especially from America, non-Western soaps provide more accessible and culturally approximate narrative themes and issues. For example, the representation of family as the central theme has made non-Western soaps appealing for Malay women. Even if there are some cultural differences, given the overall tone of cultural proximity in the non-Western soaps they are able to negotiate the content without much conflict. The imaginative pleasure which Malay women derive from non-Western soaps is linked to the proximity of setting, culture and gender. Many recent studies about non-Western soaps show this aspect of cultural proximity in action. This issue is the subject of much of the recent work on transnational consumption of Japanese and Korean popular culture (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Iwabuchi 2002b; 2004a; Iwabuchi, Muecke and Thomas 2004; Thussu 2007). Audiences are not alienated and can engage with soaps which ‘in general are non-conflictual culturally and relatively safe in terms of content and also more Asian’ (Kim and Nain 2001: 8). Ang (1985: 20) suggests that central to the pleasure of soap viewing is the ‘pleasure of recognition’. This results in the audience deriving
pleasure from their ability to recognise points of reference and express their proficiency of interpretation. However, one must also take into account that the response of Malay women to Japanese and Korean soaps may be different from that of the local audiences in Japan and Korea.

While the content of non-Western soaps varies, one consistent feature of these soaps is the representation of forms of non-Western modernity particularly from various Asian countries. By watching non-Western soaps from the non-Western countries, the audience can appropriate and imagine new forms of non-Western modernity. Scholars argue that non-Western soaps provide different elements and versions of modernity from those typically generated on Western soaps (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Iwabuchi 1998; 2002a; 2002b; 2004a). Iwabuchi, who studied the flows of Japanese popular culture around the globe, claims that:

Japanese TV drama as a modern popular cultural form, though highly commercialised, pleasurably evokes the juxtaposition of similarity and difference among contemporaneous ‘Asian’ modernities, something that American popular culture cannot achieve (Iwabuchi 2004a: 3).

Not only sharing geo-political proximity but also inhabiting the same historical phase of an evolving sense of nationhood and modernity, non-Western soaps from these locations can also provide similar experiences of modernity for local viewers to engage with. These factors account for the popularity of non-Western soaps among Malay women.
The contestation over meaning of modernity in non-Western soaps

The non-Western genre is also promoted by the state as possessing cultural norms of family values, social etiquette and respect for the elderly, which it sees as lacking in Western soaps. Non-Western soaps are promoted as good, clean entertainment over Western soaps which the authorities perceive as promoting immoral habits and hedonistic lifestyles (Bernama 2007b). Although some non-Western soaps like trendy dramas from Japan focus on youth fashion and lifestyle and Latin American soaps depict somewhat provocative sexual issues, they always end with family members reuniting and all discords in relationships being smoothed out.

Under the ideological discourses of the Look East policy and Asian Values, the Malaysian government has also joined in this rhetoric of advocating these social norms as being quintessentially Asian. Many of these soap operas tell the stereotypical narrative of the woman who conducts herself with grace as the nurturing mother or the loving wife. Promoting Korea and Japan as its role models in the heyday of the Asian Values debate, the same logic was extended to its positive evaluation of new products like soaps from Indonesia (Kim and Nain 2001). Indonesian soaps are now given even more importance for promoting Islamic values for social conduct (Hamzah 2006). Indonesian soaps with Islamic themes tell moral fables of the triumph of good god-fearing Muslims promoting religious faith.

Not only do these soaps eschew issues that run contrary to local customs and Islamic values, they even reinforce religious faith or local cultural beliefs, conventional gender norms and rules about social interaction. These soaps
construct an ideological discourse of appropriate behaviour sanctioned by tradition and it is this aspect of the non-Western soap that the government promotes. Thus, they are promoted as an appropriate site for viewers to engage with modernity without losing tradition so that the state’s vision of alternative modernity can be achieved.

The government’s patronage of non-Western soap genre is also an example of the adaptation of a global format to local contexts through the process of ‘glocalization’ (Robertson 1995). Glocalisation in Robertson’s words is ‘a global outlook adapted to local conditions’ through ‘appropriation, domestication and indigenisation’ (Robertson 1995: 28). The Malaysian government has interpreted the concept of glocalisation to suit its political interests in this manner to resist the hegemony of Western influence. Non-Western soaps mediate programs that help cements versions of a glocalised modernity without destabilising the cultural core. This process of selective adaptation has also been called ‘strategic hybridism’. Iwabuchi defines it as a process of adapting some of the foreign cultural elements mainly from the West, and strategically hybridising them with the local tastes and preferences (Iwabuchi 1998: 72).

While ‘non-Western’ soaps may have been encouraged on these grounds of cultural similarity and non-Western modernity, the authorities argue that the portrayal of family conflicts, violence, dysfunctional relationships might also instil inappropriate social trends. A local press columnist argues:

The Ministry of Information must examine thoroughly this scenario and they must take immediate action. Our people should not be intoxicated with various problem and conflict of neighbouring
countries even though we are culturally proximate. There are many
differences between us and them in terms of culture and way of life’
(Hashim 2007).

Appadurai has located such a resistance towards outside influence in the
development of ‘alternative fear to Americanization’ where ‘it is worth noticing
that [to the] people of Irian Jaya, Indonesianization maybe more worrisome than
Americanization, as Japanization may be for Koreans.’ He further elaborates, ‘for
polities of smaller scale, there is always a fear of cultural absorption by polities of
larger scale, especially those that are nearby’ (Appadurai 1996: 32). Authorities in
Malaysia express such a fear about the cultural subservience of local audiences to
the influence of content from foreign locations. While promoted as repositories of
similar values there is also the fear of being overtaken by content produced from
other non-Western locations (Bernama 2007b).

Apart from these misgivings about the detrimental impact of the soaps in
corrupting the traditional female duty to conform to these various cultural
expectations, there are also concerns that non-Western soaps present an
opportunity for excessive engagement with representations of transnational
modernity, which may lure Malay women beyond the ambit of the national
culture. In unison with the UMNO women’s wing’s condemnation of these soaps,
the UMNO youth, representing male voices not only spoke about Malay women
compromising their religious faith, cultural values and domestic duties but even
deforming the national project of modernity for an enlightened middle class
(Kosmo 2006). This is a larger concern about the dilution of national identity and
the state losing its paternalistic hold over its female subjects.
This controversy over non-Western soaps is indicative of a larger global trend of anxiety over mass importation and free flow of foreign cultural content and the impact on local social structures. In China, the popular Taiwanese soap, *Meteor Garden* was banned by the authorities on the grounds that it had the potential to corrupt young people with its content of romance and rampant consumerism (Ting-I 2002). In Uzbekistan, authorities asked the local television station to stop airing Russian soaps showing murder, corruption and complex relationships because they posed a threat to the fabric of Uzbek society (Sinyshev 2005). In Saudi Arabia, the Turkish soap *Noor* was denounced for misleading women and causing a high rate of divorce cases (al-Sweel 2008). In Afghanistan, one local television station was charged with ‘offending public morals and endangering national security’ for screening Indian soap operas. The fear about the cultural impact of television is not only voiced by authorities, such discussions also take place among lay audiences too. An Afghani man put forth his concerns and said, ‘I can control my daughter to not have illegal relations with boys, but TV is like Satan – it is something you cannot control’ (Constable 2008). The Latin soaps *Sin Tetas no hay Paraiso* (Without Breasts - There’s No Paradise) has angered some women and feminist groups in Colombia for portraying women as a tool ‘to satisfy flesh-filled male fantasies’ and denounced the media-imposed notions of female desirability that were unhealthy for women (Goodman 2006). Predictably, just as any other form of popular culture, like American and Western soaps, the popularity of non-Western soaps has created ambivalence and uncertainty within the local authorities in Malaysia too. They are still apprehensive about the impact of foreign cultural content on local audiences.

In such a scenario the government has decided to actively intervene by monitoring the flow of transnational cultural texts. In his study of television policy in
Indonesia, Kitley states that some television programs like soap opera and serials can be conceptualised as a site of mediation between the state as a producer and the public as the audience. According to Kitley, ‘the two-way movement between the expectations, interest, demands and needs of spectators, and the nation building and cultural objectives of the producers created a tension in the production process’ (Kitley 2000: 153). A direct example of Kitley’s contention is visible in this conflict over non-Western soaps in Malaysia. But the situation is a little different in Malaysia, where the state has little stake or authority as a producer of cultural content. While the government has tried to utilise popular culture as a vehicle to mobilise its ‘nation-building and cultural objectives’, soaps sponsored by the government have not been able to capture local audiences due to the lack of technical and creative capacity. For example, *Mahligai Gading* (Saharani 2005) a drama serial with a focus on stories espousing Malaysia’s multiculturalism was not successful because of poor reception. Given the high demand for foreign non-Western soaps, the Malaysian government nowadays acts more as a filter monitoring the programs that are broadcast into the country. It also attempts to regulate audience’s appropriation of the soaps.

In order to support the local television industry the government stipulated that television channels must broadcast at least 80% local programs (Wahab 2006). But this unofficial policy could not be followed through, so state run channels like RTM were asked to appoint a panel of evaluators to review Indonesian soaps to ‘weed out all elements of violence, horror, sex, and counter culture’ (Kim and Nain 2001: 7). According to a spokesperson of the Malaysian Ministry of Information, such a monitoring process is important for ensuring all the non-Western television programs are ‘not contrary to local culture and adhere to the broadcast guidelines of RTM’ (Bernama 2007b). The state run television channel
RTM has also sought to moderate its offering of Indonesian soaps despite the attractive option of high television ratings. According to them, ‘RTM is more inclined to show dramas that educate the public, instil a positive spirit and high moral values to motivate society to do better’ (Bernama 2007a). Although the Ministry of Information only has jurisdiction over state run channels like RTM, private television stations are also put under the supervision of Ministry of Energy, Water and Communication, so that the state may exercise a modicum of control over what is broadcast to local audiences (Hamzah and Mustafa 2008).

The controversy over this television genre raises the question of how Malay women, constrained within their position of being female subjects of the state, watch these non-Western soap operas given the negative official appraisal of their content. Non-Western soaps were promoted by the local authorities to counter Western influence as an appropriate vehicle for the state’s vision of alternative modernity. But the popularity of these non-Western soaps has in turn become a site of anxiety for the authorities. The terms on which Malay women can engage with modernity has been dictated by the authorities to conserve traditional social norms. Women are not supposed to seriously challenge social norms, moral propriety, cultural integrity, national identity and the state’s vision for modernity. However, it is not surprising that there is a tendency amongst Malay women to interpret modernity in terms that differ from the preferences of the local authorities. Non-Western soaps are a site of contestation between Malay women and the state over the meaning of modernity. The importation of non-Western soaps was part of a well-conceived strategy of the government; but women turn the received culture to their own advantage and engage in complex processes of meaning-production, to negotiate between the state’s demands and their own understandings. My argument rests on the premise that non-Western soaps, as a
new site to engage with modernity, have the potential to encourage Malay women to negotiate, renegotiate and to some extent even challenge the state’s vision of Malaysian modernity. Some previous research involving women and the consumption of popular culture illustrates the ability of women to negotiate and even challenge their local cultural order (Brown 1994; Lee and Cho 1990; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner and Warth 1989). Adding to this field of study, I propose my framework of ‘watching competencies’, which I will elaborate through my findings and analyses in the part II of this thesis.
PART II: WATCHING COMPETENCIES

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter is a preface to the analyses that follow in the second part of the thesis and it highlights some points regarding the research methodology utilised to generate my findings. I will begin this chapter with an extensive discussion of audience ethnography, the scholarly context from which this research methodology arose and its suitability for studying the reception of cultural texts amongst audiences. Next, I will argue for my choice of one-to-one in-depth interview as the most appropriate technique to conduct the study. This is followed by a discussion of the process involved in selecting respondents. Finally, I will present a comprehensive profile of the respondents to familiarise the reader with their cultural background and personal interests in non-Western soaps.

Audience ethnography: Method and limitation

This thesis employs audience ethnography as its main methodology and also contributes to the third generation of audience studies which ‘brings the media back to media studies, but conceives of the media and media messages in a broader sense than just as encoded text to be then decoded by a particular “interpretive community”’ (Alasuutari 1999: 7). Audience ethnography has also been adopted by feminist scholars like Radway (1984) and Hermes (1995), to examine the consumption of artefacts of popular culture such as romance novels and women magazines by women audiences as gendered cultural texts. The question of how an audience imagines media products such as television programs like soaps as representations of reality has also become a central question of audience ethnography. As Alasuutari says, ‘it may entail questions about the
meaning and use of particular programmes to particular groups of people, but it also includes questions about the frames within which we conceive of the media and their contents as reality and as representations – or distortions of reality’ (Alasuutari 1999: 7).

Audience ethnography has emerged as the most popular research methodology in the field of media research studying consumption patterns. Many media scholars (Ang 1985; Bakardjieva 2005; Brown 1994; Hobson 1982; Ida 2006; Iwabuchi 2002a; Liebes and Katz 1993; Moores 1993; Morley 1980; 1986; 1992; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner and Warth 1989; Spence 2005) have applied ‘audience ethnography’ to study how audiences read, decode and make sense of cultural texts like films, news, circulated by media. This tradition of audience ethnography is also the dominant research method in studies on the genre of soaps (Ang 1985; Brown 1994; Buckingham 1987; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Gillespie 1995; Hobson 1982; Iwabuchi 2002a; 2004a; Press 1991).

Audience ethnography evolved in the 1970s from the intellectual tradition of British Cultural Studies (BCS from hereon, see Gray 2003, Morley 2007), which was principally characterised by its belief that strategies of understanding culture can be devised by examining how it is integrated in commonplace practices of everyday life. In the field of media studies, audience ethnography also developed along these lines of the BCS’s thought that the impact of media could be best understood by deconstructing how the audience made meaning of the media content. In a way, audience ethnography emerged as a reaction to the dominant tradition of mass communication approach in media studies from the US and Canada that adopted a quantitative research outlook of quantifying trends of media consumption through surveys and statistics (Schramm 1963). Audience
ethnography in contrast is broadly aligned with the branch of qualitative research design that seeks to go beyond numbers of consumption to deciphering that process of consumption. Ellen Seiter foregrounds the research ethic that differentiates qualitative media research from quantitative methods in audience research:

... central to the renewed interest in qualitative research on media audiences have been questions of how specific audiences make meanings in their engagement with media in the context of everyday life, an emphasis on audience activity rather than passivity, and an interest in why the media are pleasurable (Seiter 1999: 11).

There are a few important points to be noted about the tradition of audience ethnography that will help to clarify its parameters as a research methodology, its differences from a quantitative mass communication framework and its suitability as a research tool for examining the question of how media content is consumed by audiences.

As the term ‘ethnography’ implies, audience ethnography integrates an anthropological focus into studying trends of media consumption. The defining characteristic of this method is to adopt the classical methods of ethnography from the discipline of anthropology. Moving beyond the numbers and statistics of a quantitative method deployed by mass communication research, it delves behind the numbers to observe subjects involved in those activities in their everyday life. As Ann Gray points out, rather than simplifying the relationship between viewer
and content in terms of numbers, it creates a multifaceted and nuanced interpretation as a complex scenario with many questions:

… what aspect of ‘audience’ and media is being investigated? How is the audience being conceptualized? What is the nature of the relationship between the audience and various kinds of media forms? What aspect of audience activity is the central focus of the research? What are the methods employed? (Gray 1999: 26).

While the quantitative framework limits the explanation of how audiences engage with media content to inadequate explanations, the process of how the audiences engage with media content is the focus of audience ethnography.

With this focus on the activity of television viewing, audience ethnography seeks to make broad-based observations as it occurs in the daily lives of its subjects as opposed to quantitative audience studies which show indifference towards factors of setting and cultural context (Morley 1992: 173). In most instances, the audience reception researches that are associated with the BCS approach have proven to yield more sophisticated findings as they examine such delicate issues as structures of meaning rather than observable behaviours on the surface.

A quantitative approach takes a top-down unidirectional approach of transmission model where the audiences are seen as transparent receivers of media messages; audience ethnography refuses such a simplistic approach. Instead it conceives of meaning-making as a fluid process where the processes of interpretation made by the audiences are not univocal (Alasuutari 1999: 4). Messages do not travel unchanged from the broadcaster to the receiver. As Seiter (1999: 14) has noted,
the negotiated reading in the context of television viewing may let the audience
‘enjoy a “pick and choose” relationship to the genre, ignoring more disagreeable
sections and concentrating on those more to taste.’ Not only is it a matter of such
selective attention, media research scholar Pertti Alasuutari (1999) opines that the
interpretation process has to be studied in conjunction within attention to the
political, religious and cultural terrain of the field of study. This reflects the
broader intellectual approach of cultural studies where ‘the key questions are
about meaning and the significance of the cultural at every level of the social and
cultural processes’ (Gray 2003: 17).

Central to this line of thought is the argument made by a leading figure of cultural
studies, Stuart Hall, and his ‘encoding and decoding theory’ which stressed the
polysemous nature of meaning and the fluid nature of the meaning-making
activity. According to Hall:

… before this message can have an ‘effect’… satisfy a ‘need’ or
be put to a ‘use’, it must first be appropriated as a meaningful
discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded
meanings, which ‘have an effect’, influence, entertain, instruct or
persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional,
ideological or behavioural consequences (Hall 1980: 130).

Further, Hall argued that three broad categories of meaning-making activity may
accompany the consumption of any media content. First, the ‘dominant-
hegemonic reading’, occurs when the audience decipher the meaning of the text as
per the preferred meaning intended by the producers because the viewers are also
‘operating inside the dominant code.’ The second category called ‘negotiated
reading’ is one where the audience will not completely align themselves with the hegemonic preference but selectively adopt the meaning and situate an altered reading within their socio-cultural experience. Third is the category of the ‘oppositional reading’ where audiences will interpret the content completely against the hegemonic code of the broadcaster and produce a hostile interpretation by filtering it through their value systems and beliefs. Thus, audience ethnography shifts its focus to the audience in terms of not simply absorbing the intended message but undertaking diverse processes of interpretation. As Bird (2003: 10) claims ethnographic audience studies are moving toward ‘a more richly contextual understanding of “audience behaviour”’ it is important to consider ‘all our qualitative methodologies as different types of ethnographic encounter that will necessarily produce different kinds of discourse depending on the context.’

While I have adopted this method of audience ethnography as my research tool, I must note that this tradition of audience ethnography has not been without its criticism. Audience ethnography attempts to integrate the research methods associated with the discipline of anthropology, Janice Radway says that the crossover from the rigorous research in anthropology to media research is quite superficial and audience ethnography conducts itself in ‘an extremely limited fashion’. With a limited focus on one aspect of the cultural life of its subjects, audience ethnography lacks the intensive and broad-based approach of classical anthropological ethnographies, which require long scale fieldwork, in-depth observation and a holistic understanding of a culture as a framework. Ann Gray says that this failing of audience ethnography vis-a-vis its purported disciplinary ideal of anthropology lies with the limited amount of time that the media researcher spends with her subjects as opposed to the long durations of cohabitation and observation required in anthropology (Gray 2003: 15).
Since audience ethnography does not have the kind of prolonged period of cohabitation and observation required in classical anthropology, audience ethnography needs to be innovative in its approach. But this can be rectified by utilising the relatively shorter periods of research in an efficient manner. Observation can be amplified through time-efficient methods with a carefully developed design. As Bakardjieva suggests audience research, ‘requires ethnographic mobility, re-thinking of an invention of new ethnographic techniques’ and ‘the research community has to accumulate experience with them in practical research situation’ (Bakardjieva 2005: 80).

To design a critical and innovative research design, a pilot test is needed to ascertain the needs of the study and the most efficient and plausible means by which they can be achieved. I had to conduct a pilot interview to test the suitability of the respondents and settings, the reliability of the interview techniques and the efficiency of the questions planned. According to Maxwell, ‘you should pilot-test your interview guide with people as much like your planned interviewees as possible, to determine if the questions work as intended and what revisions you may need to make’ (Maxwell 2005: 93). My pilot fieldwork journey began in summer 2008 with a vague perception about Malay women and their non-Western soaps consumption activity at home. This was then followed by final fieldwork interview after a few months, when I returned to Malaysia with a draft of a list of questions and interview plans. While I kept track of the main points that I wanted to raise, I did not follow a rigid questionnaire structure to allow points of discussion to arise spontaneously during the interactions. I also brought photos of popular soaps actors and actresses, DVDs of some popular soap operas and even screened some clips to facilitate the discussion.
It is also necessary to flesh out my position vis-a-vis the respondents in order to assess how this may inflect the process on interaction and interview. Perhaps it is also useful to use the term ‘welcoming visitor’ (Bakardjieva 2005: 79) to explain my position as a researcher who belongs to the same life-world as the respondents. According to Bakardjieva (2005: 77) the oft-repeated perception of ethnographic researchers that subjects in fieldwork will hide the truth from the prying eyes of the researcher is an exaggeration. In her opinion respondents do not take pains to conceal information or turn hostile, except in extreme circumstances. Apart from that an ethnographer with a level of familiarity with the location and subjects, not only has greater ease in talking to the participants, but also has intuitive knowledge about what they may or may not wish to speak about. Thus, she suggests the use of the term ‘welcome visitor’ to define a researcher who can claim a comfortable level of familiarity with the subjects to interrogate them.

While I may position myself as an insider who can claim belonging to both the locations of my fieldwork and interact with respondents on the bases of familiarity, there may be factors that hinder this process. Firstly, my gender as a male researcher may be such an obstruction in the process of interviewing women respondents. Secondly, my background as a university-educated professional may also erode that sense of familiarity for the respondents to talk in a free manner. To make sure this in-depth interview could overcome these potential obstacles, I was accompanied by my mother and some female friends at various points, in order to efface my invasiveness as a male researcher and to create a sense of camaraderie as a community.
Choosing one-to-one interviews as research method

From my experience in the pilot fieldwork, I also decided to run and organise one-to-one in-depth interviews in the final fieldwork. In the course of my preliminary research I discovered that a ‘focus group’ approach does not work as well as an in-depth interview. I discovered that focus group interviews have the drawback of being too short and often return shallow feedback. The discussions took about two minutes for every single question and most feedback was strictly structured by the dominant opinion — where one participant gives a convincing opinion, the others seem to follow, either agree or disagree without rationalising their statements. In other words, it was really difficult to get substantial or balanced opinion from all members of a group, particularly from those who were not skilled in group participation and interactive discussion.

Although most non-Western soap operas do not contain explicit sex scenes they may show cuddling, holding hands and kissing. Participants were quite hesitant to share their experience about watching soaps if the question shifted to romance and sexual issues. References to overt sexual behaviour are considered taboo particularly by those who live in the remote village area, but many respondents in my focus group in the urban area also refused to discuss issues of romance and sexuality. I thought that this circumstance resulted from my status as a male, but my respondents said that such issues were private subjects that they didn’t even discuss among themselves. Some participants in the kampung and urban Kuala Lumpur advised me to not discuss such issues openly as this may offend respondents.
However, some previous studies, which implement focus group interviews to understand how women consume soap operas, claim that themes of excessive romance and bitchy characters encouraged their participants to talk effectively (Brown 1994, Hobson 2003). My experience led me to the opinion that focus groups are not really effective in encouraging Malay women to talk. Tactful questioning was an issue in a group situation. For example, one respondent immediately refused to say anything more about Indonesian soaps, after other group members chided her for comparing some bitchy characters on a program with someone from her neighbourhood. Not only that, she had to retract whatever she had just said. These issues show that focus group studies can be an unproductive research strategy with religious and culturally sensitive topics and especially in the presence of a stranger.

The focus group’s respondents also found it difficult to attend collective meetings fixed at a particular time and location. They came from different locations and were too busy with domestic work and family matters. I also had a problem in allocating a common space for the interview. Most of them refused to come because they did not have convenient means of transport and had no one to look after their children at home.

Because of this unproductive experience, I decided to select one-on-one in-depth interviews to avoid such situations where group dynamics might hinder the output of feedback from respondents. I spent one week identifying more participants and re-arranging locations for each interview. I spent at least two hours to interview my respondents mostly in a space they feel comfortable in – home or office. The strategy of individual interviewing worked more effectively. Malay women were more open, cooperative, and comfortable in a one-on-one interview. Unlike focus
group interviews which tended to be dominated by the opinion leader, respondents in a one-on-one situation were more responsive, less disturbed, and able to focus without feeling the pressure of their peers. Many respondents also preferred to be interviewed personally in their homes instead of participating in the focus group in an outside location. One kampung respondent refused to attend the focus group interview, as she worried that her statement might provoke others unknowingly. My respondents, especially those who live in urban Kuala Lumpur were able to take on board any discussion even though it might touch on contentious issues, including family and even sexual relationships. It was understood that the interview was protected and details such as real name and location were to be kept anonymous.

However, interviewing women respondents about their television viewing is a delicate matter since I was probing them about their everyday life. As Seiter notes, ‘television watching can be a touchy subject, precisely because of its association with a lack of education, with idleness and unemployment, and its identification as an ‘addiction’ of women and children’ (Seiter 1990: 62). A large number of respondents in the focus group tended to evade the question if it was too personal. As Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack note, ‘women often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions’ (Anderson and Jack 1991: 11). Malay women are quite sensitive about issues of cultural propriety defined by Islam and adat, I tried to attune my listening to instances where they may either subtly avoid certain topics or refuse to answer questions that seem ‘dishonourable’ or ‘shameful’.
Selecting respondents

The parameters of my study were developed after a few months of consultation with my supervisor and research panel. I decided to conduct research in two locations – my remote hometown in the district of Kota Tinggi in the southern Malaysia peninsula and the urban area of the capital city Kuala Lumpur. I determined these two settings as appropriate sites for many reasons. Firstly, both these regions qualify for the primary criterion as locations where women audiences are avid followers of non-Western soaps. While the capital city is a centre of urban lifestyle and consumer culture with housewives and working women watching these soaps, my hometown also has equal access to all the television channels and women spend a significant amount of time watching these soaps. Secondly, the selection of a semi-rural and an urban setting will provide a well-grounded analysis acknowledging the diversity of Malay communities in the country. Thirdly, being familiar with both the locations — growing up in the remote area of southern Malaysia peninsula and working in Kuala Lumpur for more than ten years — I am familiar with both social settings, and have consequently gained advantages like access to social networks for procuring respondents and the ability to establish an easy rapport with them. I arrived at the selection of these settings through a pilot fieldwork.

Placing the viewership of non-Western soaps as the main criterion for choosing respondents, I was able to identify twenty-one appropriate informants for the study through purposeful sampling and snowballing technique. With purposeful sampling we can create a research design ‘selecting those times, settings and individuals that can provide you with the information that you need to answer your research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative
selection decisions’ (Maxwell 2005: 88). Through the snowballing technique (Taylor and Bogdan 1998), the selected respondents introduced me to another potential informant who was able to deal with the information discussed. To identify my informants in my hometown, I asked my mother to contact some of her friends who in turn led me to other possible respondents. Friends, relatives and work colleagues led me to respondents in the Kuala Lumpur area. I must note here that the selection of my respondents through the snowballing technique may have led me to choose women who knew each other and belonged to the same socio-economic demographic. However, I do not focus on the relation of their class and socio-economic background with their attitudes because this issue seemed somewhat irrelevant, since all the respondents seemed to express similar worldviews.

I identified eleven potential respondents in the remote village area of my hometown in Kota Tinggi, Johor. All of them are habitual followers of non-Western soap opera especially from Indonesia, Latin America, and Korea. I also identified ten other respondents in the urban area of Kuala Lumpur, who were also keen followers of Indonesian, Korean, Japanese, Thai and Latin American soap operas. I must note here that in the interviews I did not select specific programs and invite discussions about them (as in the case studies conducted by Ida 2006; Iwabuchi 2002; 2004a). Instead, I let my respondents talk about whichever non-Western soap they preferred. This method not only enabled a more spontaneous discussion, it is also aligned with the aim of my study to decipher audience attitudes to non-Western soaps as a genre and not to specific programs.

While the size and age range of my respondents might raise specific uncertainties such as representative issue and the level of reception, I have to note here that this
study by no means to be representative or generalise non-Western soaps consumption pattern amongst Malay women. I chose a small number of respondents because I realised in the field work that most responses would traverse similar grounds of arguments and ideas, with the feedback quickly reaching saturation point (Lee, Woo and Mackenzie 2002; Mason 2010). Thus, it seemed practical to only focus on a few participants because a larger number of participants would not have yielded any new insights and would have made the research process cumbersome and difficult. It also suited the purpose of my study, since I had decided quite early on from the literature review and pilot fieldwork that the concept of watching competencies could answer the research problem. Thus, I needed to collect material strategically for proposing and establishing my argument of watching competencies. As Crouch and Mckenzie puts it ‘this mode of research rests on the continuing monitoring of the interview material in relation to theoretical developments’ (Crouch and Mckenzie 2006).

Most of my respondents in the kampung setting are full time housewives in the age range of 35-50 years. It makes sense to focus on this age range because these are Malay women who are the most likely have a wide knowledge about the soaps they were watching everyday. Importantly, women at this age range have caused moral panic to the local authorities especially UMNO and were heavily criticised for not being committed with the domestic task. Although none of them were professionally employed in an external workplace, some of them run family groceries or small direct-selling businesses to earn some extra income. Their daily routine consists of housekeeping, cooking and looking after their children. And since most of these women do not work outside the house, most of their afternoons are allocated to watching non-Western soaps on television. Unlike my respondents in the kampung, most of the urban respondents are engaged in work
outside the household and are also aged between 34-50 years old. Many of them are educated and have been exposed to urban culture and lifestyle in Kuala Lumpur. Since most of them work during the day, they tend to watch non-Western soap operas at night. All of the respondents own at least one television set. They have access to all free-to-air local and Indonesian channels and some satellite television channels too.

Due to their age range, I called most of my respondents Makcik or Aunty. In Malay society, the use of such honorific titles creates a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect in social interactions. The term makcik is used to address adult married women to not only signify their seniority in age but also experience, knowledge and importantly, the level of competencies they have in matters of everyday life. If I was almost the same age as some of the respondents, I will use the term Akak (sister) during the interview for being friendly. However, for the purpose of writing this thesis, I will call them Aunty, in order to acknowledge their social positions as married women with familial and societal obligations.

As I categorise Malay women as audiences, it is important to define their viewing habits. Malay women cannot be categorised as soap opera fans per se, as the term is understood in the context of audience research (Baym 2000; Brown 1994; Hobson 1982; 2003; Jenkins 1991; 1992; 2006). Jenkins defines ‘fans’ as ‘readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture’ (Jenkins 1992: 23). But Malay women tend to be what can be called ‘habitual followers’. As habitual followers, Malay women watch soap operas regularly and closely even on a daily basis, but they do not mind if they miss an episode or two. Most importantly, their viewing habits do
not involve activities of ‘participatory culture’ like keeping the photos of actors, producing and circulating fanzines, or participating in conventions, as outlined by Jenkins (2006).

Assessed with classification risk level two for my research ethics application by the Human Research Committee at the university, I was asked to keep the participants anonymous to observe cultural and religious sensitivity. All the fieldwork interviews were recorded and conducted in an informal Malay language, but transcribed in Malay and translated into English later. As per the requirements of the RMIT Human Research Committee, all the transcriptions can only be accessed by my supervisor and me. All data will be shredded and deleted within five years after this PhD is completed (please see appendixes for details).

**Respondent profiles**

The respondents are introduced in greater detail below in order to familiarise the reader with their background, location and personal interests in non-Western soaps. The participants are divided into two categories: kampung and urban settings. Audience preferences on the whole have shifted across different genres over the last decade and individual preferences and viewing habits also differ. When I conducted my fieldwork, Indonesian soap operas were rated as the favourite genre by most of the respondents. However, the current trend of Indonesian soaps does not mean that the viewers do not watch soaps from places like Korea, Japan or Latin America.
1. **Kampung setting**

**Aunty A (50, married)**

Aunty A has lived in the FELDA housing area in Kota Tinggi for more than twenty years. Previously, she lived with her parents in a village that was approximately sixty kilometres from here. Aunty A only completed primary school. She is a fulltime homemaker and does not have any source of independent income. Her husband provides for the family and gives her a set sum of money every month for everyday groceries and personal shopping. She is also active in the local women’s society. Aunty A stays at home to watch television in her free time when she has finished all her household chores and has no community activities to attend. Her favourite programs are Indonesian soap operas that are shown in the afternoon slot on the local free-to-air Malaysian channels.

**Aunty B (49, married)**

Aunty B is married with six children and has lived in the Kota Tinggi FELDA for almost twenty years. Aunty B decided not to pursue her studies after high school because she lost interest in academic studies and started working in an electronics factory at an early age. Aunty B is a member of her local women’s society. She does not work in a factory anymore and says that she enjoys the independence and dignity of not having to work. Aunty B also rates Indonesian soaps as her favourite programs on Indonesian television channels which show a lot more Indonesian programs with little censorship in contrast to the local Malaysian channels.
Aunty C (47, married)

Aunty C has been living in this kampung for more than twenty years. She moved here with her husband and three small children when she was twenty four year old. Aunty C is a full time homemaker, although, she often goes out to help her husband in the plantation from time to time. She is also an active member of the local women’s society and loves to spend her weekends attending religious classes, cooking workshops or health discussions. She also loves to spend her free time in the afternoon and evening watching Indonesian soap operas. Although she has satellite television with a vast array of choices, she mostly watches Indonesian soap operas on the free-to-air Indonesian television channels.

Aunty D (48, married)

Aunty D has been living in the Kota Tinggi FELDA for almost twenty-five years and she had just celebrated her forty eighth birthdays when I interviewed her. Aunty D attended secondary school and the state religious school but gave up studying. She migrated here with her husband who was attracted by the government’s plan to resettle Malays in this area with the promise of a good standard of living. She started working in the local electronics factory and is now retired. Aunty D said that she enjoys watching Indonesian and Korean soaps.

Aunty E (37, single)

Aunty E grew up in the Kota Tinggi FELDA area after her parents moved in for a better life. She became a secondary school teacher after she completed her studies at the local university. Aunty E is a big fan of South Korean and Indonesian soap
operas. She loves watching these soaps in the late evening while she is marking her student’s homework.

**Aunty F (50, married)**

Aunty F is a fulltime homemaker. She was a high school dropout and worked in an electronics factory when she was a teenager. She is an active member of the local FELDA women’s society. Aunty F loves watching Indonesian and Korean soap operas. She spends most of her afternoon time watching this program through local satellite television channel. Sometimes, Aunty F asks her daughter to buy DVDs of the Indonesian soaps that she particularly likes.

**Aunty G (46, married)**

Aunty G is a fulltime homemaker and a leader of the local women’s society. She attended secondary school and worked in different roles in a few offices. Aunty G said that she loves watching soaps from Latin America, South Korea and Indonesia. She likes to watch this television genre alone at home in the afternoon and also watches the prime time soaps at night with her family. Aunty G also listens to CDs of the theme songs of Indonesian soaps from time to time.

**Aunty H (48, married)**

Aunty H has been living in FELDA for more than twenty years. She helps her husband in running a small grocery in her neighbourhood. She is a high school dropout but managed to finish her religious studies at the state Islamic school. Aunty F is a big fan of Latin American soap operas like *Maria Mercedes,*
Rosalinda and Betty Yo Soy La Fea. She has even installed a television set in her shop to watch her favourite Latin soaps in her free time.

Aunty I (49, married)

Aunty I is a committee member of the local women’s society. She has been living in the Kota Tinggi FELDA for more than twenty years. Aunty I was educated in the secondary school and state religious school. She loves watching Indonesian soap operas shown on the free-to-air Indonesian television channels. Although she is kept busy by the local women’s society, Aunty I does not like to miss her afternoon regime of watching Indonesian soaps and plans her activities to make time for that.

Aunty J (35, married)

Aunty J is a fulltime homemaker. She has lived in the Kota Tinggi FELDA for many years. She has the experience of working in quite a few places, but stopped working after she got married. Aunty J is a habitual follower of Indonesian and Latin soap operas. She started watching non-Western soaps about three years ago when the Indonesian soap Bawang Merah Bawang Putih and Latin American soap Rosalinda became popular among local women. She watches these programs in the afternoon after finishing all her domestic chores.

Aunty K (40, married)

Aunty K is a fulltime homemaker and she migrated to Kota Tinggi with her husband about fifteen years ago. She has never worked in an office or a factory. A fulltime homemaker, she spends most of her time at home with her three children.
Aunty K is an avid follower of Indonesian and Latin American soap operas. She loves watching these television programs in the late afternoon after finishing all housework before her husband comes home. Aunty K watches this program through the local satellite television channels.

2. Urban setting

**Aunty L (35, married)**

Aunty L is a university graduate and currently works in a government office. She is married with two kids and has lived in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur in a suburban housing area since 1995. Aunty L is a big fan of Korean, Latin and Indonesian soap operas. She loves watching this television genre through local satellite television channel to relax after work. She normally watches these programs alone.

**Aunty M (49, single)**

Aunty M never been married and works as a clerk in the private company. She still lives with her parents and other family members in a housing estate in the Petaling Jaya suburb. Aunty M loves watching Korean and Indonesian soap operas on the local satellite television channel in the late afternoon everyday. She also loves to buy South Korean soaps DVD from the Japanese stores in the city and watches them during the weekend.
Aunty N (married, 34)

Aunty N is a university graduate. She has worked and lived in Kuala Lumpur with her husband for more than ten years. Aunty N loves watching South Korean, Latin and Indonesian soap operas on the local satellite television channels in the late afternoon. She even thought of going to South Korea with her husband for honeymoon, but was unable to do so.

Aunty O (married, 36)

Aunty O grew up in Kuala Lumpur and has lived here for more than thirty-five years. She is married with three kids. She went to the local university and ended up as a manager in the private company. Aunty O is a habitual follower of South Korean and Indonesian soap operas. She watches her favourite soaps everyday in evening after dinner with her entire family.

Aunty P (married, 36)

Aunty P lived in a suburb on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur for more than thirty years. After she got married, Aunty P moved to a housing estate in the Bangsar suburb and resides there with her husband and children. She went to the local university and currently works as a cashier in a bank. Aunty P loves watching South Korean and Filipino soap operas. She watches these programs after work on weekdays and then during the day on weekends.
**Aunty Q (married, 48)**

Aunty Q is an entrepreneur and runs a boutique. She has been living in Kuala Lumpur for more than thirty years. She is married with two kids and lives in a condominium near Kuala Lumpur. She is a fan of South Korean and Indonesian soap operas. Aunty Q watches these television shows in her boutique while she is tailoring her customer’s clothes. She hardly watches this show at home because of her domestic duties.

**Aunty R (single, 35)**

Aunty R has lived in Kuala Lumpur more than ten years. She studied at the local university and currently works as a human resource officer in a multinational company in Kuala Lumpur. Aunty R loves watching Thai soap operas because she is conversant in Thai. She buys DVDs of some Thai soap operas that may not be broadcasted in Malaysia. She also listens to the soundtracks of Thai soap opera.

**Aunty S (married, 38)**

Aunty S works as an information system officer at a government office. She studied in technical college in Kuala Lumpur and has been lived in the city for almost twelve years. She is married with two kids. She loves watching Indonesian soap operas everyday in the late afternoon after work while doing her domestic chores at home. Aunty S also has a collection of DVDs of Indonesian soaps like *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* and *Malim Kundang*. 
**Aunty T (married, 41)**

Aunty T moved from a northern state in Malaysia to Kuala Lumpur after getting married in 1988. She own small grocery in a housing estate in the suburbs. Aunty T is a fan of South Korean, Taiwanese, Latin American and Indonesian soap operas. She has also installed a television set in her grocery. Aunty T loves listening to theme songs of Korean soap opera, *Winter Sonata* being her favourite one.

**Aunty U (married, 47)**

Aunty U is married with two children and works as an officer in a government office. She is a university graduate and has a masters degree. She spends her free time at home watching non-Western soap operas, especially those from Indonesia and South Korea. Aunty U also has a wide collection of DVDs of Japanese soaps because there are only a few Japanese soaps that are broadcast on local channels. She watches these Japanese soaps during the weekends.
CHAPTER SIX: MORAL CAPABILITY

This chapter aims to explore how selected Malay women in a remote kampung and in urban Kuala Lumpur develop moral capability as a critical watching competency in the process of watching non-Western soap operas. Their nuanced interpretations of the soaps reflect a watching competency of moral capability requiring two types of skills. Firstly, Malay women perform selective viewing to negotiate with images of modernity depicted on this television genre as a source of information to understand the complexities of modern life. In doing so, Malay women employ three types of selective learning skills: establishing distance, establishing moral boundaries and negotiating culture. Secondly, Malay women also practice oppositional viewing, whenever they perceive anything depicted on the soaps to be incompatible with Malay cultural norms. In most cases, such rejection is based on objections to issues of moral impropriety or misrepresentation of Islamic tenets. The process of negotiation involves the establishment of adaptation, distance and rejection as critical behaviours, illustrating the subtle practices involved in Malay women’s engagement with modernity.

The Ministry of Information lauded the female-centred domestic drama of these non-Western soaps for conforming to norms of Malay life (Bernama 2007b). They were promoted as apt cultural vehicles for the state’s vision of alternative modernity for its female subjects. However, the typical themes of consumerism, urban lifestyle, romance and family conflicts in these soaps have been criticised as having a tendency to corrupt Malay women. One of the major points underpinning this criticism has a moral dimension. Authorities allege that the sexualised images of female characters, rampant consumerism and the permissiveness of extra-
marital relationships depicted in these non-Western soaps, will have degenerative a moral impact on Malay women.

However, I will argue that the impact of non-Western soaps on Malay women is not a simplistic case of Malay women being seduced into emulating whatever they see on the soaps. In my fieldwork, I have found that women seem to reject this notion of being vulnerable subjects seduced by the lure of televisual images, that has been projected by the anxiety of local authorities like UMNO women and UMNO youth wings. Far from being impressionable victims of transnational culture, they are mindful of their own cultural expectations as Muslim Malay women. An important issue that appears in this negotiation process is the rigid adherence of Malay women to local cultural conventions of adat, Islam and governmental discourse of Malay modernity.

Malay women exercise moral capability, which enables them to undertake this process of negotiation with regard to the morally contentious or undesirable content in these soaps. Malay women do not reject the ideological discourses promoted by the state, but creatively forge cultural resources from their understanding of these expectations and navigate the content of the non-Western soaps. Within this wider political, religious and cultural terrain, Malay women on the ground can process and accommodate of the seemingly conflicting values of modernity and tradition. The following sections will explain my findings about moral capability.
Selective viewing

While authorities may denounce the stories of family feuds or romance in these soaps, Malay women interpret them as dramatic explorations of the vagaries of modern life. As many scholars have noted, the genre of soaps with their claims of realistic portrayals of the ‘ordinary’ create dramatic narratives, which audiences at home may perceive as the reflection of their ordinary lives through fictionalised stories and characters (Ang 1985; Brown 1994; Ko 2004; Lee 2008; Spence 2005). Hobson notes this underlining narrative form of soaps to say that ‘its stories must be the stories of the audience and its predominant emotion must be that of recognition — recognition of the characters and recognition of the stories they tell’ (Hobson 2003: 34). However, as many scholars of Asian popular culture have argued, a process of distancing from some elements in cultural texts also occurs, especially if they seem unfamiliar or foreign, (Chua 2008; Iwabuchi 2004a). Unless and until they judge a certain issue as being completely disruptive or inappropriate, Malay women do not necessarily feel the need to express such distance.

These non-Western soaps present as opportunities to negotiate such issues, Malay women proceed to evaluate such content through their own cultural expectations and become more selective about their own lives. Hence, this type of moral capability is exercised as a type of tactic that I shall call selective learning skills which is comprised of a process of adoption and avoidance. Women make value judgments between behaviours and aspirations that are desirable and those that are not, by invoking the cultural resources of adat, Islam and the national project of modernity. These selective learning skills can be further categorised into two distinct modes — firstly, soap is used as an opportunity to learn about modern life
from a distance; secondly, soap is utilised to confront issues and draw moral boundaries in personal life.

1. Establishing distance

As part of this selective learning skill, Malay women tend to view the depictions of themes like consumerism, romance and family conflicts on non-Western soaps as a means to learn about potential hazards of modern life from a distance. As Iwabuchi notes, the depiction of consumerism and urban lifestyles is one of the major factors that have made non-Western soaps popular in the Southeast Asian region (Iwabuchi 2002a; 2004a). To give an example, Aunty K said that she learnt about the social ills of modern life that were corroding traditional ways in other places. Aunty K is a fulltime homemaker and she migrated to Kota Tinggi with her husband about fifteen years ago. She has never worked in an office or a factory. A fulltime homemaker, she spends most of her time at home with her three children. Aunty K is an avid follower of Indonesian and Latin American soap operas. She loves watching these television programs in the late afternoon after finishing all housework before her husband comes home. Aunty K watches this program through the local satellite television channels. In this case, she argued that watching these soaps not only extended her knowledge about the risks of modern life but also gave her insights about avoiding such circumstances in her own life.

I think all societies in the contemporary world share similar social problems. For example, many of us have forgotten how to respect our elders. Younger generation tend to abandon their old parent especially when they have their own family. I saw many times
young people behave very rude to their old parents. In fact, some of them are willing to put their parents away in the old folks home and completely disappeared after that. Old woman like me is a hopeless. I would not be surprised if this is a problem in Indonesian and Korean societies as well (Aunty K, 40, Homemaker, Kampung – 27.03.2009).  

Taking everyday manners as an example, her reaction about the similarity of problems across cultural regions also seems to suggest that these soaps may have become a platform to engage with problematic issues of everyday life. Exercising moral capability, she consciously interprets social problems depicted on soaps as an essential educational source for learning about modern life from a distance.

Malay norms forbid men and women to form sexual relationships outside the institution of marriage. But a few non-Western soaps show characters in sexual relationships, sometimes out of wedlock. However, one respondent, Aunty B said that the depiction of such contentious issues enabled her to make judgments about her own life too. Aunty B is married with six children and has lived in the Kota Tinggi FELDA for almost twenty years. Aunty B decided not to pursue her studies after high school because she lost interest in academic studies and started working in an electronics factory at an early age. Aunty B is a member of her local women’s society. She does not work in a factory anymore and says that she enjoys the independence and dignity of not having to work. Aunty B also rates Indonesian soaps as her favourite programs on Indonesian television channels which show a lot more of contentious issues in the Indonesian society. She said that a tale of jealousy and dishonesty unfolding in the life of a young Indonesian
couple in a soap opera allowed her to learn that modern relationships were
delicate and problematic.

You need to know your partner’s personality before you go any
further in a relationship. I have always warned my children to
know their partner very well in order to avoid any problem in the
future in case they got married. Although these soaps are from
Indonesia, the issues they depict could happen in our society as

While she identified with the issues depicted in the Indonesian soap, she did not
desire an openly romantic liaison in her own life. Instead, reflecting an act of
establishing distance, she took cues from conflicts in that relationship and re-
interpreted them as lessons about the maintenance of stable marriages, a norm
required by the Malay cultural order.

While the government has voiced its concerns about the corrupting effects of
soaps on all Malay women who watch them, women residing in urban areas are
often the prime targets for such criticism. The lifestyles of kampung Malay
women are seen as being more proximate with the Malay norms required by adat
and Islam. In contrast, urban Malay women are often perceived as being in a
somewhat morally ambiguous position (Dass 2002). Faced with the temptations of
excessive consumerism, urban lifestyle and industrialisation, Malay women in
urban areas are seen as being more susceptible to the ill effects of soaps. Given
this contention, urban Malay women are under greater scrutiny in this larger
conflict between modernity and tradition. It is feared that Malay women might be
lured into relinquishing their traditional roles.
I raised this perception about the moral degeneracy of urban Malay women amongst some respondents from Kuala Lumpur. Most were literate, conversant with popular culture and had exposure to many aspects of modern life in the city. But these urban Malay women argued that such perceptions were not justified. They argued that they did not explore or pursue the lifestyles shown on television. Rejecting the paternalistic tendency of the local authorities, they argued that they were not only able to meet these challenges through their exposure to urban life, but these issues served as cautionary lessons for them to cope with the complexities of urban life. These soaps with their portrayals of domestic troubles like divorces, family feuds and unwanted pregnancies are seen as an opportunity to learn about social ills prevalent in modern world from a distance.

According to one respondent, Aunty P, who lived in a suburb on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, these social problems were of universal significance. Married with three kids, she moved to a housing estate in the Bangsar suburb and resides there for more than thirty years. Although she is too busy with her career at the local bank, Aunty P loves watching South Korean and Filipino soap operas. She watches these programs after work on weekdays and then during the day on weekends. As a well-educated woman, Aunty P said that these social problems were of universal significance; and as a woman living in the city it was important to understand them through these fictionalised representations on non-Western soaps. She said:

I know that Korean and Filipino soaps show many habits of urbanised western lifestyle such as drinking, clubbing and pre-marital sexual relationships. I guess all of these things that we
consider unacceptable are part of their lifestyle. But I also know that many Malay youngsters have adopted such ways too. I live in the city and I know what happens here. And, thus I think (urban) societies in Korea and Indonesia probably have the same social problems like us. I guess it would be very interesting if we could share our experiences and learn from them, even though it is just through the medium of their soaps on our television sets. I don’t think it is wrong (Aunty P, 36, Bank officer, Urban – 24.2.2009).

Aunty P elevates these soaps as a medium of discussion for the social problems that can occur in the modern world, but more importantly in her everyday life too. She states that such problems have every chance of occurrence in the Malay cultural sphere as well. She sees these television narratives as a window on the contentious aspects of modern life so that they can devise ways of discussing potential social problems.

These responses seem to imply that social ills cannot be completely blamed on external or foreign influence. While non-Western soaps may portray themes, which are deemed culturally inappropriate for Malay life, rejecting them as alien influences or refusing to acknowledge the existence of these problems in Malay society, is not the right way to tackle social ills. These women argued that one must take a more conciliatory and broad-minded approach to understand how these issues of modern life effect people. They argued that non-Western soaps provide a source of information, through which they can learn about such issues from a distance and hopefully avoid them in their own lives.
Another aspect of this skill of selective viewing is that Malay women take pleasure in these soaps as a source of entertainment while maintaining their distance. Displaying such an attitude, the respondents said that they accepted these issues merely at face value as a story and so of being superficial interest to them as viewers seeking entertainment. Aunty B said that she had interest in these issues, merely as a source of entertainment and not as a medium to which you turn to for guidance on your actual lives.

Come on, you will not get divorced just because you see a lot of that scene on Indonesian soaps. It is just a story. I just watch this for fun. Hey, there are many couples in my kampung who got divorced without seeing too much soaps on television (laughing)! I think it is up to us to judge what is right and what is wrong. Please, do not be too sentimental (smiling) (Aunty B, 49, Homemaker, kampung – 20.1.2009).

While she may avidly follow the family conflict depicted in the soap and shed tears over it, she treats such scenarios as a momentary lapse of sentimental outburst induced by the melodrama. The claim of soaps as works of ordinary realism purporting to act as a mirror for everyday life holds interest, insofar, as she may be able to recognise and understand them. But ultimately these soaps are merely a source of entertainment for her.
2. Establishing moral boundaries

The responses from the viewers in the last section showed that the respondents tend to interpret the contentious elements of soap operas as an educational source for to learn about the attendant risks of modern life from a distance. Reflecting another mode of exercising this tactic of selective viewing, some feedback suggests that these Malay women not only see these elements as a means of gathering knowledge but they also proceed to exercise judgment to differentiate between right or wrong. I shall group such responses as the skill of establishing moral boundaries. This skill reflects that Malay women not only see the culturally incompatible issues depicted on the soaps as immoral, they also develop their solutions by demarcating clear boundaries.

This skill of establishing moral boundaries is specifically applicable to religious soaps from Indonesia which were promoted by the local authorities as being cultural proximate to the Malay society and as vehicles for propagating Islam amongst its audiences. But the immense popularity of these soaps in recent years has raised concerns among local authorities. Discussions in the local press and the parliament have often highlighted the notion that these Indonesian soaps, which ostensibly depict issues related to Islam, can confuse Malay audiences with their melodramatic stories that misrepresent Islamic tenets. The authorities are now wary of the kind of religious practices shown on these soaps and their capacity to corrode traditional Islamic practice in Malaysia. In such a scenario of anxiety over the alleged misrepresentation of Islamic tenets and dislocation of true Islamic faith, these Indonesian soaps have incited adverse reactions for the authorities.
In spite of these reservations of the local authorities regarding the popularity of Indonesian soaps, Aunty L argued that those issues do not detract from her adherence to Islam. As a university graduate and currently works in a government office, Aunty L uses non-Western soaps opera to enrich her life experience and interestingly gives her opportunity to practice all religious knowledge that she had learnt from younger age. Living in the suburban housing area of Kuala Lumpur since 1995, Aunty L is a big fan of Korean, Latin and Indonesian soap operas. She loves watching this television genre through local satellite television channel to relax after work. She normally watches these programs alone. Aunty L do not have any problem with this television genre since she is able to create moral boundaries to reject issues that are inappropriate. She said:

There are good and bad elements in the Indonesian soap Hikmah. I know Islam in Indonesia is quite radical. Many people do not realise this fact. I think this [Indonesian soap opera] gives us an opportunity to learn about Islam, even although there are certain elements that are inappropriate. For example, I saw some characters in Hikmah touching each other even though they do not have any official relationship. I understand it just an act but you must realise if we talk about Islam, we have to follow the rule of Islam. Otherwise, no point if you want to talk about Islam through this [soap’s] story. I was educated about this since I was small (Aunty L, 35, Government officer, Urban – 22.2.2009).

While the government sees these soaps as potentially misrepresenting Islam to the audiences, she seems to be consciously distinguishing differences between Malay and Indonesian versions of Islamic practice. Her knowledge about the cultural
dimensions of Islamic practice in Indonesia give her the capacity to understand the differences in order to judge elements that are unfeasible in Malay life. Because of this she can locate the ‘inappropriate’ content on these Indonesian soaps and draw moral boundaries to differentiate between Islamic practices in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Aunty O criticised the famous Indonesian soap *Wulan* for showing a person playing with a dog, a practice forbidden in Islam. She said, ‘I can’t understand why that woman plays around with a dog. She even cried when the dog died. As a Muslim, this is forbidden’. I know this animal is cute and intelligent but we have to follow the rule of Islam’ (Aunty O, 49, Manager, Urban – 1.3.2009).

Another respondent Aunty L also demonstrated her competency in rejecting and opposing such issues that transgress Islamic norms, without the paternalistic guidance of the local authorities.

I have heard a few times that JAKIM has made complaints against some characters in *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* as being disrespectful of Islam. I understand some scenes in this soap can mislead our Islamic faith. For example, there are so many scenes black magic and revenge. Well, I have faith in Islam and knowledge of Islamic values. In fact, I can differentiate between what is right and wrong (Aunty L, 35, Government officer, urban – 22.2.2009).

Another issue that is often brought up by the local authorities in their criticism of Indonesian soaps is their portrayal of folkloric legends about supernatural
phenomena that violate Islamic restriction against such superstitions. These Indonesian soaps draw from local beliefs about spirits and fairies, which also have their counterparts in local Malay culture. These soaps incorporate such legends within their stories about middle class life in contemporary settings. For example, the Indonesian supernatural soap *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* depicts complexities of middle class life in Indonesia with supernatural elements of witchcraft, spirits etc. Perhaps the most popular television program in Malaysia now, this soap has attracted criticism from local authorities for depicting such supernatural themes that run contrary to Islamic faith.

However, Aunty M, an officer in the private company and avid fan of Indonesian supernatural soaps, said that she saw the elements of magic and supernatural on these soaps in a very different light. Living with her parents and other family members in a housing estate in the Petaling Jaya suburb, Aunty M loves watching Korean and Indonesian soap operas on the local satellite television channel in the late afternoon everyday. She also loves to buy South Korean soaps DVD from the Japanese stores in the city and watches them during the weekend. Interestingly, she acknowledged the Islamic injunction against such superstitions, but claimed that she is able to treat the fantastical stories of these supernatural soaps as entertainment. She says:

> There is a popular story about our Prophet being tortured by black magic. However, what I saw on *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* was so different from the story in the scriptures. The story on the soap was exaggerated and untrue. Anyhow, I think a person who practises black magic has no confidence to take action in real life.
Allah has given us a brain to think rationally, not to practice this stupid stuff (Aunty M, 49, Clerk, Urban – 24.2.2009).

By citing an incident from Islamic history about the Islamic rejection of superstitions, Aunty M claims her ability to make distinctions of inappropriate content through her own knowledge of the boundaries set by Islam. She proceeds to critique people who resort to practices like black magic as not only failing to adhere to the true Islamic faith, but also lacking the personal strength and character to face the realities of life.

3. Negotiating culture

Soaps acquire their fan following not only for the entertainment that they provide but for the cultural trends they initiate. Scholars have noted that it is the depiction of beach culture and middle class lifestyles in the Australian soaps which has created avid fans of the soap who regard it as a lifestyle guide (Hobson 2003; Matelski 1999). In a similar phenomenon in Malaysia, some characters from non-Western soaps are considered as idols by audiences (Bidin 2002; Utusan Malaysia 2002). This has alarmed authorities of the possibility that many of these sexualised and glamorised female characters from non-Western soaps will become idols for Malay women to emulate. The local authorities and social critics in the local press claim that Malay women will also get seduced into this fad of following fashions and trends learnt from television. This will draw Malay women into a larger web of improper consumerism, inculcating moral degeneracy in the form of vanity over one’s physical appearance.
When I cited this criticism about the tendency of Malay women to follow consumerist fads, Aunty P rejected the idea that this would lead to a loss of Malay cultural values. She said:

Malay women need to be updated with the current trends in clothing. If you wear a *tudung*, you can also wear a dress or outfit of the latest fashion with it. You need to be more creative without ignoring Malay *adat* and Islam. I work in a bank and I love to wear trousers. So, I have to think about how to match my *tudung* with my trousers. Well, you must not expose parts of your body but you can certainly take care to dress up nicely (Aunty P, 36, Bank officer, Urban – 24.2.2009).

This response shows many interesting implications of the relationship between consumerism and Malay women. Authorities may deem consumer culture as a source of moral degeneracy and vanity, which is forbidden in Islam. But in this response from Aunty P, adherence to the norms of a proper social image of the Malay Muslim woman is observed. Wearing the Muslim headgear *tudung* is her priority and the *tudung* seems to be at the forefront of her concerns in personal grooming. Aunty P may subscribe to fads of fashion required by urban lifestyle, like wearing trousers to her workplace, but she does not reject the demands of Islam or refuse to wear the *tudung* any more. In fact, other items of clothing are meant as a canvas to complement the *tudung*, the central piece from which she judges her own appearance.

Even a respondent from the *kampung* setting rejected this perception of indulgence in consumerism as an abandonment of Malay cultural expectations. A
fulltime homemaker, Aunty F said that while fashions on non-Western soaps were not suitable for Malay women, this limitation must only apply to married and middle aged women. Although she was a high school dropout and worked in an electronics factory when she was a teenager, she seemed to suggest that teenagers should be allowed to experiment with their outfits as per the trends in popular culture, as long as the outfits were not indecent, ‘it is okay to dress up in modern outfits. However, we have to make sure it is not too tight or revealing. Perhaps our younger kids should learn something from Indonesian religious soaps. God will punish anyone who wears revealing clothes and shows off forbidden parts of their bodies’ (Aunty F, 50, Homemaker, Kampung – 9.2.2009).

Contrary to the moral panic raised by the local authorities, this feedback illustrates a case of negotiation in many modes. While Aunty F expresses her approval of modern soap-inspired fashion, this open-mindedness is only expressed in relation to norms demanded by adat and Islam. She thinks that older Malay women, who are typically expected by the local authorities to be more mature, religious and devoted to family, must not get involved with frivolous activities. However, she says that Malay youths should be allowed to follow these trends as a means to experiment with modern lifestyle. Interestingly, she also picks up on a message from the soaps that the authorities overlook and even criticise as being morally wrong. Indonesian religious soaps depict characters in modern outfits, but it is only the villainous ones who dress up in revealing modern clothes. And these characters are not only portrayed in an unfavourable light, there is some retribution meted out to them to punish them for their deviancy. Thus, the appropriateness of following consumer culture is not only rationalised by the respondent within the bounds of cultural expectations of age and status defined by
adat and Islam, but messages within the soaps themselves reinforce the ideological dominance of those cultural norms.

On the other hand, Aunty O further challenged the monolithic view of the authorities that anyone who opts for a trendy fashionable image is also a morally corrupt human being. Growing up in Kuala Lumpur and has lived there for more than thirty-five years, Aunty O personally judged a person with honesty character not ultra sexy-image. Being a professional worker and well educated from the prestige local university, she has always try to be more open-minded. She said:

If you look at the good characters Rosalinda or Maria Mercedes on Latin soaps, they have an ultra-sexy image. Well, I don’t mean that we should try to be like them. But I just want to say that if you look sexy it does not mean you are a bad person. Please don’t judge book by its cover. Sometimes, a polite well-mannered type of person can become evil. I watch news on television everyday and I heard so many cases about fraud and corruption which involved this type of person (Aunty O, 36, Manager, Urban – 1.3.2009).

This statement opens up interesting questions about her interpretation where she even goes so far as to challenge moral judgement made on the bases of adat and Islam. This may suggest that the respondent’s worldview is influenced by transnational modernity but the picture is more complex. Although she clarifies that she is averse to a trendy, sexualised image as an ideal especially for Malay women, she suggests that seeing such images on the television is a matter of being able to negotiate them through one’s own common sense. She argues that it is not
right to say that people will simply follow what they see on the television without thinking further about its implications.

Further, objecting to such indiscriminate criticism by the local authorities, Aunty O argued that certain matters must be left to the choices of each individual, who must be entrusted with the capability and the responsibility to make decisions in their lives. Particularly, as a woman who lives in the urban area, she feels that the compulsions of a modern life in the city necessitate measures which may not agree with the critical attitudes of the authorities. For example, taking inspiration from a strong-willed character from Japanese soap operas, she enrolled herself in a class to learn to ride a scooter because of the transportation problems she was experiencing in the city.

I know that most Malays are still very conservative. They might say that a Malay woman is not supposed to ride a bike because she will behave like a man, which is against adat. I just want to try something new. Sometimes, when you do something unusual, you may feel different about yourself. I feel like I have achieved something in my life. And what happens if you have an emergency and you only have a bike not a car? At least you know what you are going to do (Aunty O, 36, Manager, Urban – 1.3.2009).

Though she has taken up an activity which may carry negative connotations for women in Malay society, she sees her act as being necessitated in a world where certain practical needs require women to exercise their individual judgment. It is not a matter of rejecting the applicability of adat and Islam. Instead she undertakes a process of exercising individual judgment and liberty in negotiating
practical needs while retaining an appreciation of what her cultural heritage means. This is not a simplistic scenario of erasure of cultural norms in the face of modernisation as the authorities fear. It is instead a process of negotiation calling forth a sense of individualism, a belief in common sense and having one’s own evaluation of cultural norms.

Certain respondents in the rural setting dismissed criticism from the local authorities about these non-Western soaps. One kampung’s respondent, Aunty G argued that watching non-Western soaps is accompanied by an ability to set personal limits. As a fulltime homemaker and leader of the local women’s society, she strongly claims that women in the contemporary era are becoming more aware about their limitation in the society. Taking what she saw on non-Western soap opera as the easiest thing to deal with, she rejects the authorities claim as nothing more than everyday joke:

Sometimes we may do some things which may be forbidden in our culture. You can see a young Malay woman who spends her night going out with friends will earn a bad reputation. Actually this is not right. You can go out, but you have to know your limits. Time has changed. We are not living in the 1950s anymore (Aunty G, 46, Homemaker, Kampung – 11.2.2009).

As a habitual viewer of Korean soaps, Aunty P said that the content shown on the soaps is actually not as inflammatory as the authorities perceive it to be. According to her, ‘if you watch Korean soaps carefully, when the couple kiss, it looks very artificial. There is no sexual desire at all and I don’t think we can get influenced when we watch such harmless scenes. However, it is still wrong in our
culture and religion’ (Aunty P, 36, Bank officer, Urban – 24.2.2009). She hints that the perceived fear about moral degeneracy of the soaps may have been blown out of proportion.

In the light of such responses, it can be claimed that with this moral capability women undertake selective learning from contentious aspects of transnational modernity on these non-Western soaps. These responses provide a very different picture from the government’s fear about foreign content automatically having a negative impact on the local culture.

There are many subtle processes in accepting and rejecting the cultural content of these non-Western soaps, with a host of selective learning skills. Malay women re-interpret certain contentious aspects of modernity depicted in non-Western soaps as a source for learning about potential ills of modern life from a distance. They also interpret those elements as opportunities to create moral boundaries for their own lives too. And finally, they reject the denouncing of transnational culture by the authorities to adopt an attitude of learning through negotiation. Such an approach reflects a new mode of exercising moral capability that encourages a more open ended method of learning.

Oppositional viewing

Some respondents rejected soaps that portrayed issues which could be considered morally degenerate in Malay worldview. Instead of the more conciliatory approach of learning through selection and negotiation, these women completely opposed some issues in the soaps as being incompatible with Malay culture and society altogether. However, these Malay women do not completely stop
watching these soaps, but reject certain programs or episodes that they find objectionable. This stance is reflected in a set of tactics, still under the rubric of moral capability that I shall call oppositional viewing. Malay women resist certain cultural trends propagated in these soaps which they rationalise as being averse to their individual understandings of adat and Islam.

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, Wilson has pointed out that Malay audiences exercise creative judgment in the process of reinterpretation of foreign programs. He argues that ‘a tactical reading is able to poach from textual content of one ideological persuasion to construct support for an opposing worldview. The moral polarity of a program can be reversed’ (Wilson 2004: 110). Malay women are able to practice this watching competency along the lines of Hall’s oppositional reading (Hall 1980). My fieldwork also resonates with Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding theory: meaning is not a transparent univocal message passed on from the broadcaster to the audience, but is dependent on the interpretation process of the audience. The disruptive content which would seem to hold immoral values is not only rejected but reversed through the tactic of oppositional interpretation that in Wilson’s words reflects an act of ‘reversing the moral polarity of the program’.

1. Rejection due to moral impropriety

A position of complete opposition is the predominant reaction amongst Malay women when they are questioned about hyper-sexualised characters in certain Latin American or Korean soaps. Regardless of the place of origin of non-Western soaps, Aunty H seemed unwilling to accommodate such content. Aunty H has been living in the rural kampung for more than twenty years. She helps her
husband in running a small grocery in her neighbourhood. She is a high school dropout but managed to finish her religious studies at the state Islamic school. Aunty F is a big fan of Latin American soap operas like Maria Mercedes, Rosalinda and Betty Yo Soy La Fea. She has even installed a television set in her shop to watch her favourite Latin soaps in her free time. As it is clear that Aunty H was educated at the state Islamic school and strongly attached with the kampung way of life, she claims that she would not tolerate any scene which shows a man and woman living together or even socialising without an officially sanctioned marriage.

For me this excessive romance scene is certainly not right. I will switch off my television if I see such scenes on my favourite Latin soap. I have to admit here that the kissing and hugging scene in Latin soaps are too much. I cannot accept this even though as a non-real because I know it is very wrong according to Islam (Aunty H, 48, Homemaker, Kampung – 16.2.2009).

Adhering to the strict norms of Malay culture about the sanctity of marriage, she finds such open relationships unconscionable. Holding the Malay cultural order’s belief in the primacy of marriage as an inviolable law, she leaves no room for negotiation but turns off the television set. The way she reacts here, illustrates the pervasive hold of Malay adat, Islamic values and the discourse of Malay modernity in her everyday life.

Another participant in the rural setting, Aunty E said that while romantic scenes may seem interesting to audiences in foreign locales, she was completely put off and irritated by them. She understands that people in a different cultural setting
may enjoy such content, but within the Malay cultural context such content is just intolerable for her. As a teacher, Aunty E has always put romantic scenes in the non-Western soaps as a bad example in the context of her everyday life. She said, ‘I feel terrible when I see such scenes. I know they are trying to make the story more interesting by including romance scenes but I don’t think we should watch it. I just switch to another channel then’ (Aunty E, 37, School teacher, kampung – 8.2.2009).

2. Rejection due to misrepresentation of Islam

Malay women also demonstrate this attitude of rejection of negative aspects of modernity on non-Western soaps when it comes to issues of blatant misrepresentations of Islam. As I explained in earlier chapters, modernity in Malaysia has been intertwined with Islamic nationalism. This broader agenda of Islamising the nation was achieved through projects of building Islamic banks, universities, intellectual centres, courts and so forth. More importantly the cultural aspect of this Islamisation was achieved by the hegemony of the Muslim Malay majority in government who inculcated a larger cultural environment promoting Islam as the moral foundation of the nation. With such dominance of Islamic ideologies in the Malay cultural sphere, it is obvious that representations of Islamic faith in soap operas have become a delicate matter in discussions.

In particular the emergence and popularity of Indonesian religious soaps in Malaysia, which depict themes related to Indonesian Muslims and Islamic practice, have come under close scrutiny. The local authorities not only criticise the liberal nature of Islam in Indonesia, they argue that as Islam is (in their
opinion) a unitary faith it should not be misrepresented regardless of where it is practiced.

A habitual viewer of Indonesian religious soaps, Aunty T also claimed that some of these Indonesian soaps misrepresent true Islamic teachings and beliefs. Although she is not well educated in terms of Islam as religion, Aunty T still realises that some elements of Islam in Indonesian soaps are intolerable and even mislead her as an audience and Muslim. She complained that the religious soap Dakwah presented elements that were either contrary or alien to her understanding of Islamic practice in Malaysia:

I don’t mind such scenes if it was a romance story because I am a very open-minded person. However, if you produce an Islamic story, you have to understand that Islam as a religion is not for fun and games. I will not tolerate inappropriate elements in an Islamic story, even if it is only a scene with a boy and a girl holding hands. We are very strict about things concerning the integrity of Islam. I think our cultural restrictions help us to avoid such negative elements in our life (Aunty T, 41, Grocery Owner, Urban – 2.3.2009).

Although Aunty T positions herself as being quite tolerant to the genre of non-Western soaps, she instantly rejects even a minor disruptive element in Islamic soaps.

The intolerable sentiment toward the image of misrepresentation of Islam in the non-Western soaps especially from Indonesia also can be traced amongst
respondent in the kampung. According to Aunty A, who happened to be an active member of Islamic club under the local women’s society shared a similar sentiment of outright rejection when it came to Islamic soaps. Aunty A She said that characters drinking alcohol on Islamic soaps, was contrary to Islamic faith and thus not acceptable at all.

I watched a religious sinetron called Taubat. In the beginning it was pretty good. After a while, it was not making sense at all and I stopped watching it. The character talked about repenting over his sins but at the same time they showed many scenes of him drinking alcohol. This is against Islam. I was disappointed with the soap after I saw that (Aunty A, 50, Homemaker, Kampung – 18.1.2009).

Although she agrees with the larger objective of Indonesian soaps to promote Islam, she sees these minor perturbations as being tantamount to sacrilege and thus unacceptable at any cost.

In contrast to the leniency shown in the tactic of selective viewing, respondents completely reject the misrepresentation of Islamic faith and moral impropriety in these Islamic soaps through a stance of oppositional viewing. Malay women in the kampung and urban settings unanimously value the inviolable sanctity of Islam and reject these Indonesian soaps when they mix Islamic tenets with inappropriate elements.

In this chapter, I have elaborated responses that reflect skills where women claimed that they were able to negotiate contentious elements by turning on their
own knowledge and inner reserve of morality with a watching competency I called moral capability. Thus, elements of consumerism and romance on non-Western soaps which have been deemed as a corrosive influence on the Malay world will not stop these women from watching this genre nor make them abandon their cultural norms. In this process of re-interpretation, they become even more integrated into the ideologies of *adat*, Islamic values and Malay modernity, and they utilise these as their cultural resources to anchor their worldview.

As part of this watching competency of moral capability, the responses from the Malay women reflect a plethora of skills through which they undertake this process of negotiation. Moral capability may be broadly categorised into two sets of skills in terms of the attitudes, reactions and modes of negotiation involved. Firstly, they claim that they can exercise their moral judgment to perceive these non-Western soaps as source of information about the vagaries of modern life through the tactic of selective viewing. Secondly, they claim to have sufficient knowledge of their moral responsibility within the cultural norms of *adat* and Islam to reject elements that are averse to the Malay cultural order by exercising oppositional viewing.

Within the selective viewing skills, these women interpret certain potentially disruptive elements of these soaps, such as excessive consumerism and dysfunctional families, as a source of information about how not to sink into such problems in their own lives. They see these non-Western soaps as providing a window into modern life that they could learn about from a distance. Then as part of a more proactive tactic, the respondents also demonstrate that they can draw
boundaries and limits. Further, they exhibit a tactic wherein they voice their moral capability in negotiating those elements according to their own rationale.

Apart from selective viewing, they also voiced responses which reflect unconditional opposition to certain elements that they see as being averse to the Malay cultural order. This tactic of oppositional viewing is mainly used in response to certain Indonesian soaps based on religious topics. The two main instances of such opposition are: (1), when these Islamic soaps digress and show improper elements such as romance scenes; (2), the depiction of certain elements like witchcraft that misrepresent Islamic tenets. In such a scenario, these women exercise their moral responsibility of upholding the sanctity of Islam to reject these soaps as well as the permissive character of Islamic practice in Indonesia.
CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

In this chapter, I discuss another critical watching competency, cultural proficiency as a tool for Malay women to negotiate the images of modernity depicted in the non-Western soap operas. In terms of cultural proficiency, Malay women have developed two approaches to negotiate the meaning of modernity. Firstly, they invoke the importance of family values in Malay culture to negotiate the content in the non-Western soaps and express their attachment to their roles as mothers and nurturers. In this process of negotiation, Malay women perform two broad tactics: understanding ideal motherhood and maintaining commitment to the primacy of family. Secondly, Malay women filter societal issues depicted on the soaps through the code of community values inscribed in Malay cultural norms. I have identified two variants of this tactic: appreciating communal unity and learning to volunteer.

In a decidedly patriarchal social order, men in Muslim Malay society exercise power in all aspects of life as breadwinners, leaders and decision-makers. Malay women like the politician Wan Azizah and women’s rights leaders Marina Mahathir41 and Zainah Anwar42 have made their mark by assuming important positions in the nation. But notwithstanding these recent changes in the political landscape or public life, Malaysia has a male-dominated social order. As nurturers of families, Malay women have an array of duties such as child-rearing and housekeeping in the private sphere of the home. Beyond the domestic sphere, women’s duties also extend to certain specified fields in the public sphere and in communal activities like helping out in the neighbourhood and organising celebrations. In fact, after the nation getting more developed through the
industrialisation process, many Malay women especially in the urban area involved as a waged labour.

Another charge made by the local authorities against the viewing of non-Western soap operas by Malay women, relates to this aspect of women's duties in the private and public spheres. This chapter will explore this conflict over Malay women's responsibility within their homes and in the larger society, which has been triggered by the hostility of the authorities towards these non-Western soaps and the continuing devotion of Malay women to this genre.

In contrast to this simplistic notion of Malay women rejecting their cultural expectations under the spell of non-Western soaps, I will argue that we need to examine the relationship between the soaps and the women as a process of negotiation within this cultural, political and religious terrain. As the broader argument of my thesis claims, Malay women exercise a set of strategies called watching competencies, wherein, they invoke the systematised ideologies of adat, Islam and Malay modernity and interpret the elements of modernity depicted on the soap in a way that demonstrates their continued adherence to their cultural expectations.

With regard to this charge of dereliction of their duty in the private/public sphere, the watching competency that Malay women exercise is a tactic that I shall call ‘cultural proficiency’. Malay women cite awareness of their roles as nurturers of families in the private sphere and as upright members of the Malay community in the public space and they interpret the soaps in a manner that complements those responsibilities. Thus, they negotiate their act of watching the non-Western soaps
and their cultural expectations in Malay society to exercise this tactic of cultural proficiency.

**Family values**

In Malaysia, the institution of family has been repeatedly invoked by the government as a key device in maintaining a harmonious society and producing a stable workforce in the overall strategy of nation building. But the challenges of modernisation, globalisation and economic development have often raised the dilemma of a decline in the institution of family in Malay society. As part of this larger concern about maintaining the institution of family in the face of challenges posed by modernisation, local authorities have often asked television stations in Malaysia to broadcast programs which represent family experience and uphold the primacy of family values (New Strait Times 2004). Within such a cultural landscape, soap operas have become the favoured television genre amongst Malay women audiences.

With constant scrutiny of its female subjects and their role within the larger strategy of modernisation, authorities monitor the content on television which audiences watch. As I mentioned in chapter four, non-Western soaps are promoted to not only to counter Western influence but their family-oriented dramas are also seen as aiding this strategy of promoting family values from culturally proximate locations to Malay audiences (Bidin 2003). It seems paradoxical that non-Western soaps are promoted by the government on one hand, but are also furiously debated in public discussions, on the other hand. Ambivalence about soaps of all kinds and contradictions in official positions seem to be the hallmarks of the debates around women’s consumption of soaps.
The loaded rhetoric of critics paints a negative picture of soaps but the situation needs to be examined more rigorously. Women must not be seen as passive, vulnerable subjects consuming the soaps unquestioningly. Instead the relationship between Malay women and these non-Western soaps is a process of negotiation, where the question is about how they manage the content in the soaps given the cultural expectations of the Malay world. Following my broader argument of the relationship as a scene of negotiation, in this section, I will show that women exercise a watching competency of cultural proficiency, where they cite knowledge of their role at home, to negotiate their responsibilities in their domestic lives and their passion for the genre.

1. Representing ideal motherhood

Malay women in the kampung and urban setting are almost unanimous in their rejection of the criticism of the authorities that non-Western soaps distract them from their role as responsible mothers. By way of opposition, they argue that non-Western soaps project images of ideal motherhood that inspire them to become good mothers in their actual lives. As some scholars have noted, the gendered text of soap operas is not merely oriented towards women, it is also laden with the ideological narrative of the ideal mother. Motherhood in soap operas is seen as ‘…a quality which gives women status and unites them, whatever faults they may have or whatever they may do’ (Hobson 2003: 92-93). Hobson notes, the character of mother is important in this television genre, presented in ‘the most poignant representations’ where the mother loves her children ‘…whatever their fault’ (Hobson 2003: 94).
In the discussion, Aunty B drew from certain Islamic Indonesian soaps to emphasise that watching these soaps inspired her to be an ideal mother.

I love to watch Indonesian religious soaps. Being a mother is not easy. You must be able to teach your children to behave properly and read the holy Koran in the right way. Besides, you have to understand them very well in terms what they need and what they really want to do. If you teach them holy Koran for example, you must be calm and don’t ever shout to them (Aunty B, 49, Homemaker, Kampung - 20.1.2009).

Aunty B suggests that these Indonesian soaps even aid her appreciation of the larger role of a mother which is not merely a matter of rearing her children but also of contributing to their education. This response reflects a mode of negotiation, where Aunty B interprets the soaps to reflect her adherence to cultural resource of Islamic values and responsibility. She reinforces her awareness of the importance of her duties as a mother living in the kampung by drawing from the role of a mother as a nurturing figure who will go to any lengths of hardship for the welfare of her children.

With their family-centred drama, the typical storyline of soaps revolve around family feuds, breakdown in relationships, rifts between children and parents etc. But Aunty G insists that these elements, in fact, provided her opportunities to imagine the challenges of modern society that strengthened the need for being a good mother.
I saw some ill-mannered children on an Indonesian soap causing a lot of problems. It is my responsibility as a parent to teach my children the value of respecting their elders. Soaps from Korea and Indonesia show that everyone in the world must abide by the same code of good behaviour, no matter how successful or modern you are (Aunty G, 46, Homemaker, Kampung – 11.2.2009).

Contrary to the anxiety of the local authorities that the portrayal of family conflicts on the soaps will encourage Malay women to ignore their domestic duties, Aunty G reflects an act of oppositional reading. She interprets those elements not as aspirational images of a modern family life but as cautionary tales about her role as a mother. These soaps with their story of trials of family life, with mother characters who go to the greatest length to preserve their families, inspire her to become an ideal mother against the challenges of modern life, even though they may be far from her own life as a kampung woman.

In the urban area, families are seen as being more susceptible to potential conflicts from dysfunctional relationships or misbehaving children. Discussions in the local press often allege that the busy lifestyles of families living in the city have caused parents to lose control over their children who consequently get involved in undesirable activities. But a number of urban women claimed that in this scenario, non-Western soaps have served as a means through which they learn about potential ills of urban lifestyle so that they can better monitor their children. According to one respondent in the urban area of Kuala Lumpur, Aunty U, non-Western soaps has provided her a new space to learn about social issues and problem in the neighbourhood. Recently graduated in the postgraduate level, she rejects any claim that non-Western soaps might corrode family values and
encourage family conflict. While she has a busy life as a mother for two children and manage her postgraduate studies, she does not see any logic behind this argument because Korean and Indonesian soaps has always been giving her idea to maintain and strengthen family happiness and relationship.

It is extremely important for a Malay mother to be aware of these problems, especially when you live in a city like Kuala Lumpur. The soaps serve as a source of information to learn about contemporary issues like bullying, drug use, alcohol consumption, unwanted pregnancies etc. Otherwise, as a mother I would have no idea of such issues and my children would run amok (Aunty U, 47, Government officer, Urban – 4.3.2009).

This perceived fear about increased freedom among urban children translating into deviant behaviour is perhaps misplaced. But in relation to non-Western soaps and Malay women, Aunty U claims that these soaps reinforce the notion that child-rearing in the urban area is very complicated and that a modern mother should be equipped with the knowledge of such issues, in order to face any challenge.

The drama in a soap opera often revolves around the juxtaposition of certain negative characters with the protagonist. With the ideal mother protagonist, there are also certain female characters that are often depicted as not fulfilling this ideal image of womanhood. Aunty U interprets such negative female characters on non-Western soaps as the epitome of those women who are not mindful of their role as good mothers.
I cannot understand why this woman (in the Indonesian soaps, *Habibi and Habibah*) needs to hire maid to take care their children at home. They rather go for shopping and waste a lot of time at spa and sauna. Look, they are rich and do not have to go to work anymore. This is a bad example for us because we have been taught by our tradition to take our own children. Well, don’t blame your children if they listen more to your maid (smiling) (Aunty U, 47, Government officer, Urban – 4.3.2009).

On the other hand, in the *kampung* setting, Aunty F said that the characters of strong women on *Winter Sonata* and *Intan* helped her to be strong and confident to face challenges in her personal life and above all to fulfil her role as a mother:

Being a widow is not easy. I always advise my friends not to think too much about their late husband. What they need to do now is move on with their life and pay attention to their children, which is the most important thing in life. So, I suggest them to watch *Sinetron* or Korean soaps on television. Perhaps they can learn something from there (Aunty F, 50, Homemaker, *Kampung* – 9.2.2009).

Aunty F not only cites some female characters as encouraging her to face challenges in her own life, but also as a source to motivate her friends in the neighbourhood. Drawing from these confident female characters that can live independently Aunty F emphasises the need to pay attention to their children and that family life must continue under their guidance as good mothers even if they are the sole guardians of the household.
Another urban participant Aunty O articulated the need to maintain the most appropriate balance of care in the relationship of parents monitoring their children, which can be quite fraught at times. Interestingly, she again cited how watching a soap opera alerted her to this challenge.

Children will get spoilt if we don’t pay them enough attention. However, too much attention is not good too, as they will lose their respect for us. Just look at the character of Bawang Merah on the Indonesian soap Bawang Merah Bawang Putih. Her mother just gives what she wants. This is against our adat (Aunty O, 36, Manager, Urban – 1.3.2009).

She cites the failure of the mother in an Indonesian soap, as a lesson that child-rearing is all about creating balance in the relationship between parent and children. These challenges prompt her to pay attention to her duties as a mother and alert her about the dangers that may follow if a parent does not regulate her own behaviour towards her children.

Citing another possible contention that could arise in parent-child relationship, Aunty O suggested that urban Malay parents should be cautious not to force their children into marriages. In Malay culture, parents traditionally organise arranged marriages for their children.

I know our Malay adat tends to persuade us to find someone for our daughter. I do not think that this is right. I am not saying that we must forget our Malay adat about parental decision in marriages, but we have to understand that nowadays the lives of
our children are very complex. You need to think about job, money, house, etc. I guess, if our children rely too much on us, for everything from finding a marriage partner to making decision in their life, they will never become independent (Aunty O, 36, Manager, Urban – 1.3.2009).

She argues that parents need to guide their children’s matches but not exercise autocratic control over their choices. This would curb their capacity to be independent adults, which is extremely important in modern life. While this response may indicate that Aunty O is rejecting strict norms of adat, her argument essentially reinforces her concern as a mother in fostering familial harmony. She does not see individual choice in marriage as a free pursuit of romantic love. But seeing the potential conflicts that arise from unsuitable marriages on the soaps, she argues that it is her duty as a mother to negotiate her children's wishes with parental consent so that all potential conflicts are avoided. She also sees such freedom of choice for the children as fostering a sense of independence that she as a mother must encourage in her children.

2. Maintaining commitment to primacy of family

Soap operas are often criticised for their melodramatic family conflicts of feuds, divorces, sibling rivalry and extra-marital affairs. Certainly these are precisely the elements that worry the local authorities in Malaysia, who allege that soaps have a corruptive effect on local audiences. However, in my fieldwork, Malay women in the kampung and urban setting seem to present an oppositional reading of such elements. They read such conflicts as potential disasters that must be avoided at all cost in their own lives to reinforce the primacy of family unity. Emphasising
the primacy of family unity over the lure of wealth and social mobility, Aunty F claimed:

I know many of us nowadays, especially the younger lot, treat wealth as being more important than love. But wealth will only make people suspicious and greedy, thereby causing conflict in the family. Look at what happened to the family in *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, some people are willing to murder others just for money (Aunty F, 50, Homemaker, *Kampung* – 9.2.2009).

The potential conflicts serve to strengthen the concept of family values in face of the challenges of modern life. She also criticises the tendency of younger generation to be more materialistic.

Apart from interpreting the familial conflicts on the soaps as potential disasters that must be avoided, they also find the triumph of family unity in the storyline of most soap operas from Asia highly gratifying. Aunty J noted that in the midst of the drama of middle class family life on the Indonesian soap, the story finally depicts the triumph of family unity at the end. According to her, ‘family is very important. In fact, if you watch the Indonesian soap *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* you can see how family becomes the centre of the story. I find it very heartening’ (Aunty J, 35, Homemaker, *Kampung* – 27.3.2009). Further she cited some Japanese soaps and how they re-emphasise values of togetherness and unity too.

As a *kampung* woman who strongly attached with family values, Aunty J treats non-Western soaps as another domestic routine that she has to fulfill everyday. Although she is not well educated, Aunty J sees non-Western soaps as the easiest way to get inspired for maintaining commitment to primacy of her family. She
says: They (Japanese) love to do everything together as a family. In fact, they even take a shower together. I don’t think we are allowed to do it. We still have our limits even though within family members (smiling)’ (Aunty J, 35, Homemaker, Kampung – 27.3.2009). Non-Western soaps contain depictions of modern middle class family in familiar and foreign cultural settings. But Aunty J uses this opportunity to see the lesson of family unity within the story regardless of the cultural or religious background.

In fact, an urban participant Aunty Q, made a subtle note about how these non-Western soaps show the need for family unity that is somewhat lacking in the Malay cultural order. As a boutique entrepreneur and busy with business routine, Aunty Q has to spend most of her life in her boutique everyday. Although her children had grown up and living separately, she always being touched with the family scene in the non-Western soaps.

One thing I like about Korean culture is that Korean people are still close with their families. Even if the children are grown up, married and able to make decisions independently, they still seek their family for consultation. This does not happen so much in Malaysia anymore. Young Malays do not live under one roof with their parents anymore (Aunty Q, 48, Boutique Manager, Urban - 3.3.2009).

Contrary to the fear of decline of Malay family values, she even claims that she learnt more about family unity by watching a Korean soap, which she finds as somewhat lacking in Malaysia.
Aunty Q made an interesting point talking about familial bonding lacking in Malay society, when compared with depictions of family life in a Korean soap.

There is another Korean soap called *What happened in Bali*. It highlights the importance of the role of father. After some mishaps in Bali, the heroine was so afraid that her father would figure out what happened. Well, the role of father is really important because he is responsible for keeping the pride of the family. I do not think that Malay fathers are that close to their children (Aunty Q, 48, Boutique Manager, Urban - 3.3.2009).

What is interesting to note here is that she talks about the role of the father in nurturing a sense of family unity on a Korean soap. While Malay women are consistently blamed for degeneration of family values, she subtly notes the need for fathers to be more proactive in family life in Malaysia. This can also be seen as an expression of subtle criticism of the behaviour of Malay men as fathers and the paternalistic attitude of authorities that only criticise women about their familial responsibilities.

The local authorities often accuse Malay women followers of these soap operas of dereliction of familial duties. I have shown that women exercise cultural proficiency to show their awareness of their domestic duties through strategic interpretations of these soaps. They derive pleasure and inspiration from the soaps the dominant ideological narrative of ideal motherhood embedded in most non-Western soaps. They interpret the depictions of conflicts of middle class family life on non-Western soaps in strategic ways to reinforce the significance of familial unity at all costs. Taking up such attitudes, Malay women negotiate the
expectations in the domestic sphere and their activity of watching these non-Western soaps.

Community values

In the Malay cultural world, some proverbs like *Bersatu Teguh, Bercerai Roboh* (United we stand, divided we fall) and *Jiran Sepakat, Membawa Berkat* (Neighbours who live harmoniously will bring blessings to all) are often invoked as traditional tenets of Malay *adat* emphasising the importance of community values. The government often invokes these sayings from Malay *adat* in its strategy of fostering a harmonious society. The concept of *gotong royong* is a prime example of such co-option of Malay *adat* by authorities to reinforce the importance of community values. Chio defines *gotong royong* as:

Often associated with Malay rural life and practice, encoded in the concept is a belief about the interconnected nature of how and what things are like, whether in reference to relations of people to their community, their engagements with each other or their relations to the larger social, economic, and physical environment. Used in this way by locals to represent in terms of actual and concrete actions like community cleans-up, house-moving, the construction of community-oriented buildings and so on (Chio 2005: 142).

Within the traditional discourse about communal values in Malay society, Malay women are allocated specific duties through which they can contribute to their community or society at large. Once required to work alongside their spouses in
the fields, Malay women’s duties in the public sphere now mainly extend to ceremonial activities in the community which have been designated as part of ‘women’s chores’ called *kerja-kerja orang perempuan* – like organising customary feasts, helping out in the neighbourhood, attending rituals, and so forth (Omar 1994: 10).

Local authorities have expressed concern that the broader cultural change accompanying modernity has also made Malays more individualistic people who now lack a spirit of community and generosity. They allege that this runs contrary to the traditional Malay ethic of communal unity, cooperation and harmony. These are not merely perceptions voiced in discussions in the press or amongst ordinary citizens. The highest echelons of the political power holders, in the parliament and the government, have voiced such sentiments. The former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi was quoted as having expressed his concern about the Malay neighbourhood losing its sense of communal unity (Hamid and Mion 2007).

However, in keeping with my broader argument about watching competency, I will show that the scenario is not a simplistic case of women simply forgetting their societal responsibilities in their communities and neighbourhoods. Instead, it is more fruitful to analyse the situation as a scene of negotiation. Malay women exercise their cultural proficiency about their awareness of communal responsibilities to negotiate between the soaps and their cultural expectations. Responses from the Malay women seem to suggest two variants of this tactic of exercising cultural proficiency of their public responsibilities. Firstly, they re-emphasise their understanding of the necessity of communal unity from the representation of societal conflict on non-Western soap opera. Secondly, women claim that they learn to imbibe a spirit of volunteerism in their neighbourhoods.
from certain characters and scenarios depicted in these soaps. The next section will elaborate on this.

1. Appreciating communal unity

In contrast to the allegation made by the authorities that Malay women retreat into isolation and reject their societal obligation when watching these non-Western soaps, my respondents in the kampung and urban setting rejected this notion of being vulnerable subjects brainwashed by the soaps. Their feedback suggests that we need to examine how Malay women negotiate between their passion for these soaps and the cultural expectations thrust upon them in the public sphere. In keeping with my argument about exercising cultural proficiency, I will show how women interpret these soaps in a manner where they claim that they gather more knowledge to complement their appreciation of communal unity by watching these soaps.

As an example of this tactic, a kampung woman Aunty J correlated depictions of neighbourly behaviour on an Indonesian soap to complement her understanding of the importance of communal unity.

If you do not get involved in communal events in society, no one will attend your wedding ceremony. Please don’t be too selfish. Who want to help you to prepare the ceremony then? You need people around you to make the ceremony work! I saw this happen on sinetron. I really don’t want such things to happen to my family (Aunty J, 35, Homemaker, Kampung – 25.3.2009).
Aunty J notes that the failure of a wedding ceremony on an Indonesian soap due to antipathy amongst neighbours or lack of communal involvement, alerted her to the responsibility of aiding her neighbours in such activities. She complements the Malay ethic of gotong royong of attending community celebrations and contributing to preparations with these scenes from a soap opera to exercise her cultural proficiency.

Some of my respondents in the urban area cited more examples where soaps raised their personal awareness of the importance of contributing to community activities. Being a government servant and as a member on the management committee of her apartment complex, Aunty S claimed that by watching a Korean soap she learnt new means by which community interaction could be fostered in an unfamiliar or new surrounding like an urban residential complex.

It is important for you to know the people you live with. I saw a scene in a Korean soap where a newly wed couple was introduced to their neighbours. This is really good because most people in the city are very isolated nowadays. Let’s say if you have an emergency, or sick or something in the middle of night. I reckon you will need neighbour’s help (Aunty S, 38, Information System Manager, Urban – 25.2.2009).

She draws from a Korean soap to learn how one can maintain cordial relations and a sense of community in an environment like an urban residential complex, where one is constantly meeting new people. As opposed to the criticism that non-Western soaps hinder the Malay ethic of community spirit, this response suggests
that she is interpreting from the text certain new codes of social etiquette that are not practised by Malays, who have recently been introduced to urban living.

Aunty T, who also lived in an apartment complex in the city, claimed that she enjoyed watching Korean soaps to see people working together as a team.

One thing I like about the Koreans is their discipline. If you watch *The successful story of the bright girl*, the characters work together even if they have different views on a particular issue. Well, we tend to give up if someone doesn’t agree with our view. If you want to work in an association, you need to be disciplined, punctual and willing to do extra work without complaining (Aunty T, 41, grocery owner, Urban – 2.3.2009).

It is interesting to note here that Aunty T not only draws her inspiration from teamwork depicted on a Korean soap, but also expands upon that point to criticise the lack of such spirit amongst Malays. In contrast to the criticism of the authorities, she exercises her cultural proficiency to show that she not only learns from these soaps to strengthen her sense of community spirit but also seeks to rectify certain undesirable behavioural traits amongst Malays.

The responses cited above illustrate how Malay women derive inspiration from these soaps to strengthen community spirit by reinforcing the spirit of *gotong royong*, learning new mannerisms and rectifying perceived errors amongst Malays. Finally, one respondent also claimed that other than providing such ideals of communal unity, this television genre also provided her a window upon people...
of different cultural backgrounds, which helped her to appreciate the diversity and
the need for communal unity in Malaysia as a nation. Aunty T said that:

Watching Korean and Taiwanese soap opera sometimes helps me
to have an appreciation of other people and their cultural
background. We don’t know so much about Chinese or Indian
culture, even if we live with them. At least, Korean and Taiwanese
soaps give me some idea how to please my non-Malay friends in
the neighbourhood. I guess, we have to understand their culture
and sensitivity in order to create unity in the neighbourhood
(Aunty T, 41, grocery owner, Urban – 2.3.2009).

According to Aunty T, non-Western soaps have helped her to learn about the
traits, preferences and customs of other cultural groups. From the interest that was
piqued by these foreign soaps, she expresses an increased appreciation of other
cultural groups within Malaysia and expresses the need to appreciate their
traditions too. In contrast to the anxiety of the authorities that representation of
foreign locales will expose Malay women to foreign values, here Aunty T
exercises a watching competency that interprets the soap in a manner, which in
fact emphasises her adherence to official ideological discourse of national unity in
Malaysia. She deflects the depictions of foreign cultures on these soaps to re-
emphasise her cultural proficiency about her duty towards fostering communal
unity.
2. Learning to volunteer

Malay women interpreted some depictions of communal work on non-Western soaps as inspiring a spirit of volunteerism. By absorbing this spirit of volunteering for public activities from these soaps, they claim adherence to the tenet of Malay *adat* about *gotong royong* i.e. working for the benefit of the community as a whole with no expectation of reward (Thompson 2007: 125).

An interesting example of this tactic relates to the organ donation campaign launched in the early 2000s, which attracted a lot of public attention and government funding. Many Malays, especially those living in the rural areas expressed scepticism, fear and confusion at the prospect. Some even expressed outright opposition, saying that Islam forbade such activities (Kamsari 2007). Given this controversy, Aunty C cited an interesting example of how non-Western soaps intervened to heighten her understanding of public responsibility attached with the organ donation programme. In fact, being a *kampung* women who has a limited education and strongly attached with the Malay culture, it is not easy for Aunty C to get convinced with the practice of organ donation. She said:

> First time I heard about the organ donation campaign, I thought it was ridiculous because I had never heard of such a thing before. Besides, I was always thought it forbidden and bring negative values to the family if we do that. After I watched *Intan*, I understood how it might save somebody else’s life (Aunty C, 47, Homemaker, *Kampung* – 3.2.2009).
While the exhortations of the campaigns on the ground may not have succeeded in convincing her, the depiction of organ donation on a soap opera in a storied format gave her a better understanding of the organ donation process and the moral responsibility attached with it.

When I conducted this fieldwork in February 2008, there was a nationwide alert in Malaysia about a possible outbreak of tropical diseases like *dengue* and *chikungunya* fever. Inspired by some depictions of neighbourhood cleanliness drives on Korean soaps, Aunty D said that she volunteered to keep her neighbourhood clean in a spirit of *gotong royong* to aid the prevention of the outbreak of the diseases.

I made sure that all the garbage was be placed right in front of my house before the garbage truck comes to pick it up for disposal. I reminded my closest neighbours to do so too. Have you seen *Winter Sonata*? They often organise cleanliness drives in their neighbourhood. I think Korean cities are very clean and beautiful. Cleanliness is necessary. In fact, Islam also teaches us the importance of being clean and healthy (Aunty D, 48, Homemaker, *Kampung* – 6.2.2009).

Not only is she aware of her communal responsibility in the neighbourhood but she also correlates some depictions of neighbourhood cleanliness drives on Korean soap opera as ideal acts of public-spirited volunteering that will aid the authorities.
In another interesting response, Aunty O claimed that this objection against the viewing of non-Western soaps is unjustified because she adheres to her cultural expectations of volunteering in the community with diligence.

At least I cook and manage my house properly. If there is a *kenduri–kendara* (communal feast)\(^4\) in the neighbourhood, I will not hesitate to attend and lend a hand. But my husband will sit there in front of television, watching his football match and pretending like nothing is happening around him. I think this is not a good attitude for our children (laughing) (Aunty O, 36, Manager, Urban – 1.3.2009).

Aunty O not only rejects the paternalistic criticism of the authorities about the vulnerability of Malay women to the corruptive effect of the soaps; but she also goes further by jokingly claiming that it is, in fact, her husband who lacks a sense of community spirit. She is aware of the public responsibilities of a Malay woman required by *adat*, but it is her husband who sits entranced in front of the television oblivious of such activities. She subtly derides patriarchal authority that places the onus of cultural propriety upon women alone. Her response can also be read as a vindication of the genre of soap opera itself. As a genre depicting ordinary life with the family at the centre of the drama, the soap operas watched by women relate closely to their everyday lives. But the football match that her husband watches is not related to their actual lives in any way.

Contrary to the negative perception amongst the authorities that watching these soaps desensitises Malay women to their public duties, these respondents show how they interpret certain elements from the soaps to negotiate their expectations
through these two tactics of cultural proficiency. They interpret the soaps as proving them with an avenue for appreciating the value of communal unity and imbibing a spirit of volunteerism through which they can adhere to the cultural expectations of their society.

With regard to the criticism of local authorities that non-Western soaps harbour detrimental values in two main areas of female responsibility — familial duty in the private space of the home, and communal duties in the public sphere, I have chosen to foreground a watching competency by the name of cultural proficiency. I have shown that with this tactic of cultural proficiency, Malay women cite their awareness of their responsibilities in the public/private sphere and interpret the soaps in a manner that complement those responsibilities. I have shown how the tactic of cultural proficiency is exercised with regards to the responsibilities of upholding family values in the private sphere and community values in the public sphere. From thereon, I have outlined the specific modes in which the tactics are exercised, namely by inculcating the spirit of ideal motherhood and giving primacy to family unity in the private sphere; and learning to appreciate communal unity and imbibing a spirit of volunteerism in the public sphere.
CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCERNING CONSUMERS

The rise of indiscriminate consumerism is often a subject of criticism by the local authorities in Malaysia. This chapter examines how Malay women develop watching competencies as a discerning consumer who negotiates the lure of consumerist culture promoted in the soaps. It looks at two kinds of negotiation practice in relation to visual images of consumer culture in non-Western soaps: presentation of self and urban lifestyle. Malay women negotiate the depiction of consumer culture in the non-Western soap through a worldview developed through their cultural resources of adat and Islamic values. I have collated the responses from Malay women to identify three main tactics of this watching competency of a discerning consumer with relation to presentation of self: enjoying images at a distance, adherence to cultural conventions and exercising personal judgment. Malay women are also discerning when it comes to the depiction of urban lifestyle in the non-Western soaps. Their responses suggest two types of negotiation: adapting modern lifestyle to cultural conventions and exercising cautious materialism cautious materialism as consumers.

While the storyline of any non-Western soap may have its unique narrative themes, one consistent feature of this television genre is the representation of consumer culture. In fact, the spectacular presentation of consumerism is what generates much of the pleasure of watching soap operas for Malay women audiences who engage with those images as ideals of modern lifestyle. However, this element of consumerism has become another target of criticism of the local authorities about the corruptive effect of non-Western soaps on Malay women audiences.
Anxiety about the depiction of consumerism in non-Western soaps is part of a broader concern about the negative impact of consumer culture on the social fabric of Malay society. In Malaysia, consumer culture is not promoted indiscriminately as a positive and salient feature of economic development, but it is subjected to constant scrutiny. Fischer notes, consumerism in Malaysia has been subjected to ‘intense political and religious contestation’ (Fischer 2008: 35). This contestation is governed by a strict code of what is permissible and what is forbidden by Islamic values, where the Islamic code of halal/haram\(^45\) (allowed/forbidden) consistently ‘informs and controls ideas and practices such as the wearing of gold and ornaments; wigs and hairpieces; statues; paintings; photograph; keeping dogs; cleanliness; industries and crafts; sexual appetite; spreading the secret of conjugal life and innumerable other areas’ (Fischer 2008: 29). The Islamic code of consumption is not merely a cultural norm, it is also enforced through public policy. The government has taken comprehensive initiatives like establishing the Halal Industry Development Corporation\(^46\), in order to bolster the development of halal factories in the country and even make the nation a global hub for halal products (Utusan Malaysia 2007).

With the Islamic code of halal/haram, the contestation over the portrayal of modern consumerist lifestyle in soap operas provide an interesting case to explore how women respond to such negative criticism. Many previous scholars have acclaimed the potential of soap opera to be a particularly potent site for women to stage resistance against their patriarchal social order. But I want to consider this view with reference to the specificities of Malay society. Malay women are committed to the dominant ideological discourses of adat and Islam. Therefore, instead of claiming outright resistance against the patriarchal Malay social order, their responses adopt a path of negotiation. The participants rejected the notion of
being submissive subjects but also seemed complicit in submitting to the given cultural order. In other words, this situation shows that Malay women already negotiate their complex cultural terrain. In this chapter, I elaborate how Malay women exercise this watching competency of being a discerning consumer to invoke their own interpretations of *halal/haram* to show that they can negotiate the content of the soaps while adhering to the cultural values of Islam and *adat*.

This chapter investigates two areas of consumer culture which are mediated through these non-Western soap operas: presentation of self and urban lifestyle. Malay women, in both the *kampung* and urban setting derive pleasure from the glamorous images of the soap opera heroines. In order to explore how women negotiate the lure of emulating the glamorised characters on these soap opera characters, I will explore how they exercise the tactic of being a discerning consumer to negotiate between such a desire and the cultural sanctions against it.

The quintessential modern urban lifestyle depicted in non-Western soaps creates the desire for social prestige and upward mobility afforded by consumerism. But I explore how women negotiate the desire for the modern lifestyle propagated in the soaps and the criticism of materialistic consumerism that it entails.

**Presentation of self**

In Malay culture, the image of ideal femininity is associated with a genteel, cultivated, well-groomed, beautiful woman as articulated in the concept of *santun*⁴⁷ (graciousness, especially in women). Beauty is not considered to be a stand alone physical characteristic of a woman, but is mediated through these cultural conceptions of genteel and modest femininity. Furthermore, cultivating one’s physical appearance for beauty is not seen a free pursuit of individual desire
but an act prescribed by societal codes about appropriate behaviour for women. Beauty as an ideal is only desirable as a means for women to satisfy their husbands and maintain conjugal love in their marriage\textsuperscript{48}. Not only must women appear modest as per the Islamic code of dress, but also the very idea of pursuing beauty is permitted for married Malay women alone.

It is within this scenario of rigorous cultural contestation over female physicality that non-Western soap operas and their propagation of glamorous female characters is criticised by the local Malaysian authorities. They allege that such images might influence Malay women not only to dress inappropriately but also pursue a self-centred desire for beauty that transgresses the boundaries of appropriate femininity. However, I want to argue that while Malay women express their interest in consumer culture depicted in these non-Western soaps, such an attitude does not necessarily mean that these women reject Malay cultural conventions. Instead, they negotiate their desire for these aspirational images of glamorous female beauty depicted on the soaps by scrutinising it through what is permissible by local cultural norms.

With regards to this issue of construction of identity through presentation of self, I have collated responses from Malay women and categorised them into three tactics of exercising watching competency of a discerning consumer. Firstly, Malay women perceive some depictions of female characters as spectacular images to be enjoyed, not as role models to be emulated. Secondly, they consistently monitor the products they consume to reject items of personal grooming that are forbidden as \textit{haram} in the Islamic code of consumption. Thirdly, they also exercise personal judgment to scrutinise products, which may
not be explicitly proscribed by cultural norms, but are nevertheless a little inappropriate in the Malay world.

1. Enjoying images at a distance

Some respondents said that they only look at the images of the glamorous women on the soaps to ease their minds and relax after finishing the tiring domestic chores at home. Kampung woman Aunty B said that, she does not seek to emulate the images of the glamorous women but only perceives them as distant spectacles meant for entertainment:

I just love to watch these glamorous heroines for pleasure (smiling). I like to see their colourful dress and outfit. I always wonder how they can come out with that kind of design. Their jewellery is nice too. Well, I cannot wear the kind of outfits they wear (laughing). I am the old makcik (Aunty). Who will notice if I wear that kind of dress? (laughing). It is just enjoyable to watch


Although she may derive pleasure from watching women in these non-Western soaps wearing clothes that may be forbidden by the Islamic code of cultural propriety, it does not mean that she would want to imitate their style of dress. Revealing strict adherence to Islamic values, she rejects any possibility of wearing such clothes in her actual life. She insists that she does not perceive these images of women in revealing costumes as a role model to emulate. Far from it, she only derives pleasure from the depictions of women in this manner as a distant interesting image. This response reflects Aunty B exercising her watching
competency as a discerning consumer, where she negotiates the pleasure of watching these soaps with the cultural expectations of the Malay order.

The question arises whether women in the urban setting voice the same response of outright rejection as Aunty B, so I raised the same question with some of my urban respondents. A regular viewer of Latin American soaps, Aunty S from Kuala Lumpur said that she would often wear clothes inspired by the glamorous heroine on her favourite Latin American soap opera:

If I have a party or gathering amongst my family members alone, I would not mind wearing outfits like the ones Rosalinda\(^49\) has. Hey, I want to look glamorous sometimes as well! (laughing) I know it is a bit revealing but it looks so nice. Well, that is just my dream (laughing). I have kids to take care of. They are more important than expensive clothes (Aunty S, 38, Information system officer, Urban – 25.2.2009).

There are multiple nuances of personal engagement within this one response. Aunty S does not mind wearing fashionable clothes for special occasions within the private space of the home, since Islam allows Malay women to exercise such freedom amongst family members. While claiming that she can utilise this sanctioned liberty to follow her heroine, she simultaneously rejects such pursuits as frivolous activities to emphasise her priorities as a mother who needs to take care of her children. Aunty S may idolise a soap opera heroine and even test the possibility of imitating her within certain limits. But in the end, she dismisses it as a frivolous pleasure best savoured as an imaginary engagement with the soaps and not as something to be pursued in actual life.
2. Adherence to cultural conventions

The cultural trend of Malay women using cosmetics to enhance their physical appearance has increasingly become a point of discussion in the local press (Pileh, Ismail, Zabidi, Awang, & Ahmad 2001). A number of participants in my study say that they watch non-Western soaps specifically to get tips on personal grooming and make-up. However, these women cite strict adherence to the cultural conventions while using those cosmetics.

A regular user of cosmetics, Aunty G told me that she would not only dress up but also put on some make-up to make herself presentable for her husband when he returned home after a tiring day of work in a plantation. Pointing to the lead female character, Thalia Sodi Miranda in the famous Latin soap Rosalinda as her idol, she claimed that it is her wifely duty to please her husband in this manner:

I guess it is not wrong if we groom ourselves a bit to impress our husband. Who would want to live with a dirty and impolite wife? In fact, our tradition tells us to do so. Our religion encourages us to pay attention to personal hygiene. The problem arises when you over-indulge in such activities. People will talk behind your backs if you don’t pay attention to your appearance. And people also will talk if you put too much make up like soap’s star on television. So, it’s a matter of balance. This is very important, my dear (laughing) (Aunty G, 46, Homemaker, Kampung – 11.2.2009).

Although she cites the glamorous heroine of a Latin American soap opera as her ideal of feminine beauty, she justifies using cosmetics as part of her traditional
duty of taking care of her physical appearance as a wife. Malay cultural conventions defined by Islamic law stipulate that women must cultivate their physical beauty not for personal vanity but only to please their husbands. By conflating her use of cosmetics and idolisation of a soap opera heroine with Islamic norms about appropriate feminine beauty, she exercises the tactic of being a discerning consumer who adheres to cultural conventions.

Aunty O also talked about this issue of personal grooming as a wifely duty by citing a scene from an Indonesian soap where a man leaves his wife for being uncouth and ugly:

I guess we should learn from a story on the soap *Hikmah*. The woman did not take care of herself and her husband finally left her. In Islam, we are encouraged to groom and dress up for our husbands. It is wrong when women put a lot of make up to show off or unmarried women put on make up to attract attention. Allah created us not to show off but to praise His power for creating us (Aunty O, 36, Manager, Urban – 1.3.2009).

Here, Aunty O not only reinforces the convention about the pursuit of physical beauty as a part of wifely duty, but also cites some other limits that must not be transgressed. Since physical beauty of a woman is only seen as an aid in maintaining a marriage, cultural norms stipulate that single women must not use cosmetics to attract attention. She also criticises women who use makeup to attract attention in public for personal vanity or unmarried women who use makeup.
In recent years, there has also been some debate over the halal certification of goods, especially due to the growing importation of products from foreign countries in a booming market like Malaysia. This debate has also extended to the use of cosmetics by women. Issues pertaining to cosmetics and halal certification were discussed in the recent International Conference on Halal Cosmetics and Toiletries to raise concern about the ingredients of cosmetics in the local market and boost the manufacture of halal cosmetics locally in Malaysia (Nee 2010). My respondents claimed that they scrutinised every product especially the ones imported from abroad for a halal certificate to ensure that it did not contain ingredients forbidden for consumption by Islamic rules.

An urban Malay woman Aunty M claimed that while she was drawn to cosmetics from Korea after watching the beautiful heroines on Korean soaps, she would not risk using products from a non-Muslim country like Korea:

Yes, I was so amazed by the beauty of Korean women on the soaps. They are so particular about their appearance and use cosmetics with such good taste. Well, I don’t know if we can consume their products because I heard some of my friends tell me that they may use animal fat as an ingredient. As you know we are not allowed to consume any non-halal animal fat. This is a major risk if you buy cosmetics from non-Muslim countries (Aunty M, 49, Clerk, Urban – 24.2.2009).

Although Korean soaps may have inspired Aunty M to idolise some of their heroines, she exercises her watching competency as a discerning consumer who
adheres strictly to Malay cultural conventions. In spite of her apparent desire she rejects the possibility of using Korean cosmetics since they are not halal.

The response from another urban respondent Aunty N shows her exercising even greater caution in choosing her cosmetics. She said that she not only avoids all products from non-Muslim countries but also checks products from Muslim countries for a genuine halal certification from Malaysian authorities.

I wish I could have fine skin like the Korean women [on the Winter Sonata]. I always wonder how they manage to retain their beautiful skin and look young. However, I have to be careful about buying cosmetics from abroad. We can never be sure about the ingredients of imported cosmetics. We need to find out how the item was produced, even if it was imported from Indonesia. That’s why I mostly use our local products. I feel reassured because it has a local halal certificate (Aunty N, 34, Government Officer, Urban – 7.3.2009).

A sense of cultural proximity with a Muslim neighbour like Indonesia may seem sufficient reason to persuade Aunty N to use their products. However, she expresses an almost pedantic level of caution about only consuming products that are genuinely certified as halal by local authorities. Through such cautious scrutiny and scepticism, she displays the watching competency of a discerning consumer. She may idolise the heroines of foreign soaps, but only consumes products that meet the local standards of halal certification.
3. Personal judgment

Malay women not only showed their competency within the stipulated norms of Malay culture, but also voiced responses that reflect personal judgment in areas where cultural norms may not be explicitly articulated. This is part of a skill of personal judgement of exercising the watching competency as a discerning consumer.

A fan of Indonesian soaps, Aunty F said that she admired some female characters in the modern outfits they wore:

I love watching Indonesian soaps because I love to see the way the female characters dress up. They look very modern and trendy. I have to admit that I wear short pants at home sometimes. I feel more comfortable doing my housework in shorts because sometimes it is too hot to wear a sarong. Well, I only wear short pants inside my house where no one is able to see me (laughing) (Aunty F, 50, Homemaker, Kampung – 9.2.2009).

Although she is aware that the modern clothes worn by the characters on Indonesian soaps are not permitted in the strict code of Islamic norms about female dress, Aunty F still wears short pants in her house when the weather is humid. But this does not mean that she rejects the norms of female dress. Instead, she exercises personal judgment to make use of the freedom to wear such revealing clothes only within the private space of her home when she is alone.
Unlike the *kampung* respondent above who said that she only wore modern clothes in the privacy of her home, many of the respondents in the city confessed that they liked wearing modern dresses in public too. According to Aunty R, modern clothes are essential for an urban working mother like her:

I like watching Thai soaps because I love to see the way Thai people dress up. They look modern, confident and glamorous. I also wear some decent modern dresses on special occasions when I go out with my female friends. Although I wear some plain trousers in the office, I do not dress up because it is a work environment. You might make some people uncomfortable (laughing) (Aunty R, 35, Human Resource officer, Urban – 25.2.2009).

Although her preference of dress is for the colourful trendy clothing of Thai soaps heroines, Aunty R is aware of the limits within which she must pursue her desire for wearing such clothes. She only indulges herself by wearing such clothes in the company of female friends on special occasions. Also as a working woman, she understands the need to project a professional image. She may wear modern clothes like trousers which are not deemed indecent in an office environment with male colleagues. Thus, she exercises her personal judgment about the differences in dress codes required in a work and leisure environment.

Another urban respondent Aunty M said that she enjoyed wearing jewellery like the heroines of the soap operas:
Well, it is not wrong to buy and wear jewellery, but one must not show off. Do you think I am going to wear my jewellery like Bawang Merah or Rosalinda? No Way! We must realise that some of us may not be able to afford such luxuries and if you parade your jewels in front of them, it will hurt their feelings. I keep some gold jewellery for emergencies. If my children fall seriously ill and we need some money, the solution would be to sell my jewellery (Aunty M, 49, Clerk, Urban – 24.2.2009).

While she likes wearing her jewellery to enhance her personal appearance, Aunty M recognises the need to do so in moderation and is quite emphatic about not flaunting one’s wealth. Not only must she wear jewellery with restraint, she principally considers it as an asset for the family and not an aid for her personal vanity. Wearing expensive jewellery is a means of garnering social prestige for her family. Also as part of a longstanding tradition amongst Malays, the family jewels may also double up as an asset that can be utilised in times of need.

The tudung or headscarf worn by Muslim women in South-East Asian countries like Malaysia and Indonesia is an item of clothing required in the Muslim code of dress for women. Tudung is meant to veil one’s femininity or aurat in public. In Islam, it is compulsory for Malay women to cover their aurat, an important element of which is hair that must be covered. Different from the fully veiled headgear in Muslim countries of the Middle East, the headscarf or tudung worn by South-East Asian women with jeans or trousers has become a means of asserting cultural propriety while being modern and outgoing. Tudung in the Malaysian context has ‘become a personal presentation of self in a “modern” world’ (Mouser 2007: 172).
Religious soaps from Indonesia often portray women wearing a version of *tudung* that only covers the hair, which is fashionable amongst women in that country. I was informed by a number of participants that the Indonesian *tudung* has also infiltrated the local market. As some scholars have argued, cultural proximity will facilitate the flow of trends from one region to another (Iwabuchi 2002a; 2004a; Straubhaar 2003).

While the Indonesian *tudung* may not transgress any norms of appropriate dress stipulated by cultural conventions of *adat* or Islam, this subject has become a topic of discussion among Malay women. A *kampung* woman Aunty A expressed her dissatisfaction with the Indonesian *tudung* and said that it was not appropriate by Malay Muslim standards of dress, since it only covers the head in contrast to the Malay *tudung* which covers a woman's chest as well. Although she found the Indonesian *tudung* more comfortable, she only considered it appropriate for wearing at home:

> I tried to wear the Indonesian *tudung* once, but it didn’t work for me. My face is too big for this *tudung* (laughing). I laughed when I looked at myself in the mirror because it only covers my hair and parts of my neck. What about my chest? What will happen if you wear a tight shirt? Our *tudung* is much better because it not only covers the hair and neck, but the chest as well (Aunty A, 50, Homemaker, *Kampung* – 18.1.2009).

While the Indonesian *tudung* may satisfy the dress code stipulated by cultural norms, Aunty A exercises her personal judgment here to show her competency as
a discerning consumer. Citing strict adherence to the Malay style of Islamic dress, she rejects the Indonesian *tudung* in favour of the Malay *tudung* even if the difference between the two may be minimal.

Urban respondent Aunty O said that she prefers the Malay *tudung* although many of her work colleagues have resorted to wearing the Indonesian *tudung* in her office:

I prefer our traditional Malay *tudung*. Perhaps I am just used to it, but it really works with my lifestyle. I know that the Indonesian *tudung* is very popular at the moment but I don’t like it so much. The style and fabric is plain and bland; not like our Malay *tudung* which has traditional embroidery and patterns to make me look like a Malay woman (Aunty O, 36, Manager, Urban – 1.3.2009).

Although the authorities may patronise Malay women as vulnerable subjects who will lose their sense of cultural integrity under the influence of foreign soaps, Aunty O exercises her competency as a discerning consumer beyond the stipulated norms of Islam or *adat*. While the Indonesian *tudung* may have bypassed the scrutiny of the authorities since it satisfies the basic requirements of Islamic dress code, Aunty O rejects it in favour of the Malay *tudung*. She champions the Malay *tudung* as not only being superior in quality to the Indonesian *tudung* but sees as an essential item of clothing that preserves her cultural identity as well.

Although the depiction of glamorous, modern female characters from non-Western soap operas may have promoted the consumerist trends of fashion and
cosmetics amongst Malay women, these responses reveal how this issue needs to be explored as a process of negotiation. The allegation of authorities that women will simply follow all trends shown on television is far too simplistic. Malay women are discerning consumers in matters of self-presentation. Malay women perceive the glamorous images of heroines on the soap operas not as ideals to be emulated but as distant images removed from their actual lives. They also consistently invoke the halal/haram code of Islamic law to scrutinise the products they consume. Finally, with regards to certain objects that may not transgress any stipulated norms of Malay culture, they exercise their personal judgment to stay within their cultural conventions.

**Urban lifestyle**

Another arena of contention over consumerism is the depiction of modern urban lifestyle in non-Western soaps, which the authorities fear will encourage materialism among Malay audiences. However, in keeping with my argument about exercising watching competency as a discerning consumer, I want to argue that Malay women negotiate the lures of foreign urban lifestyles from an ideological framework of Malay cultural propriety. Responses in the fieldwork suggest two distinct types of negotiation. Firstly, Malay women adapt desirable aspects of modern lifestyle by filtering change through their cultural expectations. Secondly, they reject certain elements as being too materialistic and incompatible with Malay tradition.
1. Adapting modern lifestyle to cultural conventions

A number of respondents, in the kampung and urban setting alike, expressed their interest in the decorative styles of houses on Korean and Indonesian soaps. Aunty A said that she watched Indonesian soaps for the beautiful houses in order to take some tips from these programs to maintain her own home in the same manner:

I just like to watch the houses with their green front yards. They look beautiful and organised. If I had more money to spend, I would like to have such a garden in front of my house too. However, one thing I do not like about Balinese gardens is that they love to put statues\textsuperscript{55} for decorative purposes. This is haram in our religion since we are not allowed to use idols (Aunty A, 50, Homemaker, Kampung – 18.1.2009).

Although Aunty A expresses her desire to decorate her home in the same fashion as the houses shown on Indonesian soaps, she rejects the use of statues of old Hindu goddesses in Balinese gardens, since any object of art attempting portraiture is considered as idolatry in Islam. With this knowledge of the haram nature of statues in Islamic law, Aunty A exercises her fidelity to Malay cultural values as a discerning consumer to reject foreign cultural items, in spite of her desire to have a beautiful garden like the ones shown on the Indonesian soaps.

Respondents also showed interest in talking about the social routine involved in the depiction of modern urban lifestyle of the characters on the soaps. They expressed their desire to indulge in activities like shopping and dining out. But
they said that one must be able to adjudicate one’s limits when leading such a lifestyle within the social decorum required for women in Malay culture.

An urban participant Aunty O said that she idolised the lifestyles of a heroine on a Korean soap. She said that she saw the life led by the heroine as the ideal social routine she sought for her own life in the city:

I still love shopping even though I am married (laughing). Well, I can’t help it. This is a woman’s habit. In fact, I believe most of the women who live in the city area love to go shopping and socialising with friends at the karaoke centre or bowling arena. I want to be more independent like Yoo Rin but I won’t hurt my husband (smiling). Although my husband is a very open-minded person, I don’t want him to get suspicious (Aunty O, 36, Manager, Urban – 1.3.2009).

Aunty O imagines the social activities of the heroines on the soap operas are necessary and salubrious elements of leading a modern life in the city, but she is conscious of the limits within which she must practice such liberties. The freedom of an urban social life is not a means to assert her independence from the husband but one to be enjoyed in moderation with his consent alone.

As a resident of a kampung, Aunty F may not follow such a lifestyle on a daily basis, but she still emphasised the need for enjoying such activities whenever possible:

Look, I am aware that I am married, so, I better behave like a married woman. But even if I am married, I can still go out with
my friends for shopping or eating out in the restaurant. Your social life does not end once you are married. You can go out with friends but make sure your husband knows whom you are going out with and make sure you do not come back too late. We are not like Korean or Latin women on the TV dramas. They are free to do anything. I also do not force my daughters to stay home all the time. They need freedom to socialise with their friends. It does not mean that I will give them liberty to do what they want; I will make sure that I know their friends well and they are back home on time (Aunty F, 50, Homemaker, Kampung – 9.2.2009).

Even though Aunty F argues that she desires some elements of modern lifestyle for herself and her daughters, she seeks to exercise such liberties within limits. As a married woman, she will go out with some of her female friends but only after seeking permission from her husband. Adapting the liberties of a modern lifestyle to cultural expectations, she seeks her husband’s consent for her own activities, and in turn exercises her control over the children as a mother. She also rejects the hostility and suspicion within certain quarters of the Malay populace about young women going out and justifies the need for young Malay women like her own daughter to go out. She claims her responsibility as a parent in giving freedom to her daughter within reasonable limits as well as controlling her activities. Aunty F is aware that social controls curtail personal liberty, but times change and the expectations of a modern lifestyle must be negotiated with each generation.
2. Materialism with restraint

The purchase of goods and services is part and parcel of a middle class lifestyle. However, moderation is also a standard rule in Malay cultural conventions. Respondents are conscious of the lure of consumerism and expressed the need for self-discipline to avoid over-indulgence in a materialistic lifestyle.

An urban participant, Aunty O said that she found the lifestyle of some characters on Korean soaps attractive, but she objected to the conspicuous use of consumer goods:

You do not have to give your partner jewellery or expensive gifts like the hero of *My Girl*. A card or a small box of chocolate is enough. What women really need is a sign of appreciation. I think the Koreans overdo it. Why should you waste a lot of money just to propose to someone? Our religion discourages us from wasting money on such activities (Aunty O, 36, Manager, Urban – 1.3.2009).

An ardent fan of Korean soaps, Aunty O enjoys watching the glamorous lives of the characters on these soaps. However, she dislikes this culture of spending large sums of money for gifts or pleasure. She argues that spending money to prove affection for somebody would commodify relationships and stresses the superiority of Malay cultural norms that champion austerity and moderation.

Although some participants in the *kampung* also expressed their interest in the images of modern living, they seemed to be less impressed with such activities of conspicuous expenditure and gift-giving. They seemed to be contented with the
A kampung lifestyle and their desire for social prestige only extended to owning some valuable property, which would enhance the financial stability of the family. A kampung resident Aunty H said:

You don’t need to follow these new-fangled customs of giving gifts for no reason like some city folks. What concerns me is that even important traditional ceremonies are being affected by this culture of ostentatious gift-giving in the kampung. You know we have a tradition of wang hantaran. Nowadays, you must at least offer eight thousands ringgit for wang hantaran. When I was young, wang hantaran was not as expensive as it is now. This is not good. If you don’t have enough money, you will have conflicts in the family over money matters like the ones we see in these soaps (Aunty H, 48, Homemaker/Grocery Owner, Kampung - 16.2.2009).

Aunty H perceived the trend of giving gifts as ostentatious consumerist fads that had no place in traditional Malay life. She was also alarmed that this general culture of conspicuous spending and parading of wealth had also attached itself to traditional ceremonies of gift-giving on important occasions like weddings.

In conclusion, my research shows that Malay women know how to be discerning consumers to find a middle ground between the lures of consumerism embedded in these non-Western soaps and the cultural conventions defined by adat and Islam. I show this tactic being played out in two areas influenced by consumer culture — presentation of self and modern urban lifestyle. The authorities may fear that the glamorous images of women from non-Western soaps will prompt
Malay women to slavishly use fashion and cosmetics. But I have shown that they actually exercise a number of tactics as discerning consumers who balance the desire of enhancing one’s physical appearance while adhering to cultural conventions. My research also suggests that Malay women are not unduly influenced by the depictions of modern urban lifestyles on foreign soaps and reject excessive consumerism as being too materialistic.
CHAPTER NINE: ADULT CAPACITY

My argument about watching competencies has sought to show how Malay women strategically negotiate the depictions of modernity on the soaps by interpreting the content of the soaps through a worldview formed by their cultural resources. So far I have elaborated on the watching competencies of exercising moral capability, cultural proficiency and discerning consumerism. The focus of this chapter is to explore how Malay women reject the notion of being passive, vulnerable subjects to claim full competency as adults with life-experience and cultural knowledge.

In Malay culture, maturity of age is an important parameter by which the social structure is defined. The hierarchy of Malay social order is constructed according to the age of its people based on the perception that one gains greater experience and knowledge as one grows older. An older person has license to greater personal freedom and the power to make decisions for others. A person is allocated this position of seniority in Malay society as one grows older, regardless of wealth or social status. Profession or education may garner one social prestige within a community. But the notion of being an elder is related to one’s holistic knowledge in matters of life experience, specifically relating to teachings of Islam and adat. Consequently, an elder will command greater respect depending on their level of proficiency in such cultural knowledge, even if they do not have a secular education.

A person is also judged mature by the amount of social obligations they shoulder, which is seen as a proof of what can be called life-experience. According to
Karim, Malay society is clearly stratified into groups by this parameter of family life-experience, into the parental and the younger generation:

Members of the younger generation are generally excluded from formal ritual responsibility. Instead, the parental generation is given the leading role in ritual responsibility, symbolically expressed in the euphemisms of being *sudah masak* (already cooked)\(^{58}\) or having *sudah makan garam dulu* (tasted salt first)\(^{59}\), in contrast to the young and single who are still *mentah* (raw)\(^{60}\) or have not *belum rasa garam* (tasted salt)\(^{61}\) (Karim 1992: 156).

These metaphors of ‘already cooked’ (sudah masak) for parents and ‘raw’ (mentah) for young people prove how the life-experience of being married and having family obligations attaches a status of maturity to parents.

Malay women claim that they are capable of negotiating the depictions of modernity on these soaps and are not the vulnerable subjects as the authorities claim. Malay women invoke multiple aspects of their status as mature adults possessing the requisite qualifications of cultural knowledge, life experience and parenthood. It must also be added that this status of maturity claimed by Malay women is not merely taken by them as a license for them to watch these soaps without any restrictions. They accept the responsibility of maintaining the social integrity of Malay Muslim community as the main prerogative of this position of maturity.

From my fieldwork, I have collated responses into two tactics which demonstrate such adult capacity being exercised: adherence to the required cultural
conventions of the Malay social order and strategic disobedience against the paternalistic stance of the authorities.

**Adult capacity to adhere to cultural conventions**

Firstly, I would like to focus on the responses in which Malay women cite their maturity as being a source of strength that helps them to adhere to the cultural conventions of Malay society. They cite strict adherence to cultural conventions in order to dismiss allegations that non-Western soap operas endanger their cultural integrity. They profess their maturity in terms of their abilities to monitor their children and exercise self-control, to argue that these skills constitute a demonstrable ability to adhere to cultural conventions.

1. **Monitoring children**

The prime responsibility of a mature adult is to be a good parent. Kampung woman, Aunty P said that she differentiates herself from her children on the basis of this notion of maturity:

> When my children watch cartoons on television, they often get too carried away with all the excitement and the images. I cannot imagine what would happen, if I allowed them to watch Korean soaps with their scenes of romance, alcohol, relationships. They are still *budak mentah* (raw children or immature) and can be influenced easily (Aunty P, 36, Bank officer, Urban – 24.2.2009).

Aunty P draws a distinction between her privileged position as a mature adult and her impressionable children. She calls her children ‘*budak mentah*’ or immature
and says that she would not give them license to watch the questionable content in Korean soaps because they do not have the adequate experience to distinguish between wholesome and unhealthy examples of behaviour. I will present other responses which show this position of maturity is explicitly invoked by respondents when they lay down the boundaries for the children in their care.

As I clarified in the beginning of this chapter, the notion of maturity is loaded with connotations of a married adult with adequate life experience, cultural knowledge and family obligations. Citing such immersion in the cultural knowledge of Malay tradition, a participant from the kampung setting, Aunty I claimed her ability to judge content which is contrary to Islamic knowledge that must be monitored for immature children:

I think the outfits that the Latin American soap heroines wear is inappropriate. They are against our tradition because you cannot expose parts of your body in public like that. I am really worried about our children getting influenced into dressing up like them. I can see some of them have already become spoiled and tend to ignore Islamic values. That’s why I do not allow them to watch Latin American soaps. They need to go to school first and learn what they are allowed to do and not allowed to do. And yet, do you think children will think the way we think? I don’t think so (sighs). Kids will always be kids (Aunty I, 49, Homemaker, Kampung – 17.2.2009).

Aunty I rejects the revealing clothes worn by characters in some Latin American soaps, as she finds them inappropriate by adat and Islamic standards. She
criticises the prevalence of such trends among young people and emphasises the need for children to be properly schooled in Malay cultural conventions. Aunty I privileges her status of being knowledgeable in Islamic conventions to establish a distinction between herself and young people, whom she identifies as vulnerable subjects in need of control from mature parents like herself.

Even in the urban areas, the notion of maturity is employed with similar connotations and tradition is treated with the same deferential respect without any challenge to any of its assumptions. To give an example, although Aunty T is just a housewife, she is accorded a position of seniority and expected to make decisions about religious issues in her residential complex due to her age and knowledge of cultural traditions. On this position of respect given to her, she said:

> Although some of my friends are more educated than me, they still seek my advice and I often worry about giving them incorrect answers for their questions. For example, a close friend came to see me yesterday to ask about the interpretation of some Koranic verse and a few weeks ago my neighbour wanted me to lead the *kenduri* (feast) ceremony for their newborn grandchild. They expect me to know everything because I lead the religious class. I have no choice since I am the oldest here. If you are asking me whether it is okay to watch Korean soaps on television, I might say yes and no. Yes for me, but no for young children. They know nothing about Islamic teachings and our way of life taught by *adat* (Aunty T, 36, Web Writer, Urban – 1.3.2009).
This response establishes that the cultural norms associated with maturity are practiced in the urban areas as well. Aunty T talks in a somewhat self-deprecat ing tone about the respect with which she is treated, but she is quite direct when it comes to the attitude that elders must take with reference to children. She emphasises the point that children, especially those living in the city, must be monitored by adults like her who have the requisite skills. Aunty T’s response establishes that even in the city a mild-mannered, unauthoritative woman clearly sees the need for monitoring children.

Other women were even more emphatic about the need for parents to exercise control over children. Formally educated in a religious school, Aunty Q cited her capacity in monitoring children while watching soaps that may portray misinterpretations of the holy Koran:

You can’t play around with the holy Koran. I don’t want to blame Indonesian sinetron for showing incorrect ideas about Islam, but we have to realise that our cultures are different. I was trained in a religious school as a child, so I am very familiar with our holy Koran and I still try to learn more of its lessons. Now watching this Indonesian sinetron, I often worry about my children. Sometimes they join me to watch Mutiara Hati in the afternoons and they keep talking about the supernatural practices as if they were real. That is why I always sit and talk to them whenever something is shown on television (Aunty Q, 48, Boutique Manager, Urban – 3.3.2009).
Even if Aunty Q does not denounce the soaps, she cautions that one must watch these soaps with a degree of scepticism and distance. She cites her religious education as a source of knowledge by which she can steer clear of being misled by any program with misinterpretations of the Koran. She is concerned that her children do not have a similar degree of proficiency in Islamic knowledge to recognise incorrect religious facts, and consequently succumb to the depiction of supernatural elements on these Indonesian religious dramas. Thus, she expresses the need to watch the programs with the children so that she can rectify any misleading depictions on the soaps through her own knowledge of Islamic practice.

Aunty Q highlighted her adult capacity in monitoring her children by watching the television soaps with them, to guide them through the nuances of correct Islamic knowledge. But another respondent’s view about control of children reflected a more prohibitive and stringent attitude. A kampung participant Aunty G said that Latin American soaps with their excessive romance content are off limits for children in her household:

I will not allow my children to watch Latin soaps and talk about such ‘dirty matters’. It’s rude, you see. Well, I talk about these issues with my friends sometimes because it is adult business (laughing). If you are a child, please behave like a child and do not mess around with adult business before your time. Look at what happened in my neighbourhood. I heard rumours about someone who fell pregnant without being married. Like I said they are still young and do not understand things clearly. My advice is that if
you are still single please stop watching Latin soaps (Aunty G, 46, Homemaker, Kampung – 11.2.2009).

Aunty G exercises her adult capacity in monitoring her children by forbidding her teenage children from watching Latin American soaps. From her position as a mature adult, she enforces the Malay cultural dictum that sexuality is only permissible within the institution of marriage. She considers sexuality a matter forbidden for children and all unmarried young people. She thinks that children out of wedlock are a catastrophe visited on those who do not observe those rules.

2. Exercising self-control

Apart from citing their role as parents with the requisite life experience, familial obligation and cultural knowledge who can monitor their children, Malay women established their maturity by arguing their ability to exercise self-control. Women claim that they are not easily influenced by the soaps like immature young children who are vulnerable to the lures of foreign soaps. While the content of some Latin American soaps has invited sharp criticism from the authorities, Aunty D dismissed them as nothing more than frivolous entertainment. She laughed off the suggestion that such inappropriate content may incite indecent sexual behaviour and cited her age as a mature adult to argue that she is capable of controlling herself.

There are many bedroom and kissing scenes in Marina that I believe are against our Malay adat and Islam. Well, I am married and these subjects are not a big issue for me. It’s normal you see (chuckling). I am too old and I know how to control myself
(laughing). Sometimes if the romance scene in *Marina* is too long or graphic, I feel quite embarrassed and irritated. Then I just switch to another channel (Aunty D, 48, Homemaker, *Kampung* – 6.2.2009).

Aunty D accepts that sexual themes are against Malay cultural values. However, she asserts that her age and marital status accord her the position of a mature adult capable of watching these soaps without being swayed by them. She watches the soap for its narrative content and accepts the romance scenes as part of the storyline. But when she thinks that the sexual content unnecessarily overwhelms the storyline, she expresses her discomfort even disinterest. Aunty D privileges her position as a mature adult who can exercise self-control and not be lured by inappropriate content.

Supernatural themes in religious soaps from Indonesia are criticised by the authorities for promoting misrepresentations of Islamic faith and propagating superstitions. However, Aunty C still watched these soaps with their thrilling storylines for entertainment. Aunty C claimed her maturity, by saying that these supernatural soaps were nothing more than frivolous entertainment for her and that she was a mature adult with the requisite Islamic knowledge and thoroughly capable of guarding her Islamic faith:

Perhaps there are some supernatural elements in the Indonesian religious soaps, but that is not going to affect my faith in Islam. I am too old to be bluffed by a stupid story about ghosts (laughing). It is only entertainment and I don’t think people will go looking for a *bomoh* (shaman) once they watch a supernatural soap. Of
course not! I went to religious school when I was a child and know what is good and bad. Now, I am a leader of the local religious group and I always raise discussions about Islamic *hukum* (law) in everything I do. For example, in my group I recently discussed the *hukum* to be followed if you watch a program like *Hikmah* (Aunty C, 47, Homemaker, *Kampung* – 3.2.2009).

Aunty C cites her Islamic knowledge to justify watching these popular and sensationalistic Indonesian soaps on supernatural themes. In fact, she goes further to claim that while she may watch these soaps for entertainment, she is constantly on a vigil interpreting the content according to the norms of Islamic law. She says that she is fully capable of staying true to the dictum of Malay Islamic faith.

With relation the criticism of these soaps as a frivolous waste of time, Aunty H asserted awareness of her responsibilities as a mature adult who does not need any guidance from an external authority:

Why are you telling me this? (laughing). I watch Indonesian *sinetron* (soaps) for relaxation, after I finish all my housework. I don’t think these shows will make me forget my everyday responsibility as a Muslim. When it is time for prayer, I stop watching the soap and only continue after I finish my prayer. The most important issue is for you to be able to manage your time (Aunty H, 48, Homemaker/Grocery owner, *Kampung* – 16.2.2009).
She cites her capacity as an adult thoroughly conversant with all the expectations of a mature Malay woman and her personal, religious and cultural duties. She argues that she can manage her home without guidance, that she is able to watch these soaps and dispense her duties in a balanced and proper manner.

**Adult capacity for staging strategic disobedience**

The sections above highlighted the tactic of asserting adult capacity where women exercise their competency in adhering to the cultural expectations of women in the Malay world as mature adults. In this next section, I would like to concentrate on a completely different mode through which such capacities are exercised. Here, I elaborate upon responses where women cite their status as mature adults to go further and even challenge the authoritative stance of these local governmental and public voices that put their behaviour under constant scrutiny. This section presents examples in which Malay women utilise their competence as adults to stage what I call strategic disobedience against the authorities. They cite the very parameters of cultural knowledge, life experience and age, which accord them the status of mature adults, to question the authorities that constantly undermine their ability to judge in a demeaning and patronising manner.

1. **Critique of authorities**

As a part of this tactic of exercising adult capacity for staging strategic disobedience, I will focus on instances where women take a more assertive role by asking the authorities to be more reasonable in their policies and attitudes. The privilege of being a mature adult gives them right to ask the authorities to take a
rational, moderate stance in preserving cultural traditions which must be tailored to suit the modern Malay world.

Aunty E seemed confident enough to challenge the authorities and its interference with people’s personal choices, and in doing so she asserted her own proficiency in Islamic knowledge as a mature adult:

When we talk about religion, we should not be so rigid and authoritative. Islam is about allowing people to express their faith in God, not about ordering them around. You cannot claim something is wrong without giving a good reason. If they stop airing these programmes, I would say that the government is behaving like an immature child (Aunty E, 37, School Teacher, Kampung – 8.2.2009).

Aunty E implies that the authorities have perhaps employed the discourse of Islamic values in a somewhat despotic fashion, and cites her own interpretation of Islam to claim that it is a more liberal faith of personal choices. She asks the authorities to not dictate to the public but engage with the public in a reasonable fashion, giving adequate reasons for their policies. While the authorities may constantly interfere in this matter, she argues that it is not people who need guidance but the authorities which are acting like immature children with irrational demands.

Having lived in Kuala Lumpur for the last 20 years, Aunty L has been a habitual follower of soaps from the 1990s. She began with Japanese soaps such as Oshin and Rin Hanne Konma, and was now a fan of contemporary soaps from Latin,
Taiwan, Korean and Indonesia. She still spends most of her afternoons watching this television genre. Criticising the recent denouncement of soaps for propagating immoral sexual conduct, she said:

There is a lot of sexual content on these soaps. If they want me to follow all the rules of Islam, I don’t think I could watch any of these soaps. They need to accept that these things happen in our real lives as well and not pretend as if sexuality is not an issue for Malays. I think they need to be more reasonable (Aunty L, 35, Government officer, Urban – 22.2.2009).

Aunty L claims that the demands of living in a modern world mean that one cannot follow all the rules of Islam. What one needs is a sensible approach with flexibility in interpreting religious faith according to the practical needs of modern life. She rejects the claims of authorities who often invoke some tenet or other of Islamic faith to denounce these soaps, as is the case in this example of criticising romance scenes as being haram by Islamic law. She rejects such a denunciation from the authorities as a hypocritical stance which pretends that sexuality does not exist in the Malay world. Further, she argues that because sexuality is a fundamental fact of life, Malays must adopt a more flexible approach in their religious norms and make space for the discussion of such issues.

While the respondent above argued for the need to allow for a more flexible interpretation of Islam by the authorities, Aunty N made an interesting point about the need to differentiate between Islam as a spiritual faith and adat as the social ethic which is more suitable for governing matters of everyday life in the Malay world. Citing her privileged position as a mature adult adept in Malay cultural
traditions, she asks the authorities to understand the nuances in the difference between the two and not confuse one with the other:

I don’t see any problem for us in watching Filipino soaps. You cannot stop airing this program just because you don’t like to see women wearing revealing clothes. I guess our leaders are confused, because they are judging this issue by Islamic standards. If they want to judge everything by the strict codes of Islam, I don’t think we can watch anything on television. If you want to discuss the issue in terms of our adat, I don’t think the way the heroines dress up on the Filipino soaps is wrong. We have to know the difference between Islam and adat (Aunty N, 34, Government officer, Urban – 7.3.2009).

Aunty N is staging strategic disobedience when she cites her interpretation of the difference between adat and Islam and which she thinks has not been understood by the authorities. Her adult capacity as a person well versed in cultural knowledge gives her authority to suggest an alternative way in which a more rational debate about what is appropriate in Malay audiences can be conducted. Placing Islam as a religious spiritual faith and adat as a secular code of ethics of everyday life, she suggests that such a distinction would be able to alleviate most of the confusion created by the overtly stringent norms of Islam.

Aunty P draws this issue of distinction between adat and Islam further to ask the government to take a more local, culturally appropriate stance towards enforcing Islamic values as such:
I cannot understand this controversy. I am an adult. I don’t mind if they say that young children will get spoilt by watching these soaps. Besides, I think Malay women have to be aware of all the trends in the larger world. We are not living in an Arab country. If you know how to drive a car like a Korean soap actress, why is that a problem? We should be more progressive and independent while retaining our cultural identity. Look, please think carefully before you decide to ban everything (Aunty P, 36, Web Writers, Urban – 24.2.2009).

Debating with the authorities about their enforcement of Islamic laws, Aunty P asks the authorities to take a pertinent stance on this issue. Claiming her knowledge of Malay Islamic practice as a distinctive tradition that must suit its own people, she asks the authorities to not imitate rules from Muslim countries in the Middle East. She fears that this will in turn impinge upon the freedom of women in the Malay world.

2. Questioning authorities

While the above responses highlighted how women may exercise their adult capacity in negotiating with the authorities to take a more reasonable approach, this second tactic of staging strategic disobedience show instances where they go further to challenge the authorities altogether. Malay women question the stance of local authorities like UMNO for their constant criticism of this television genre and their paternalistic approach towards Malay women.
When I mentioned the controversy over the soaps to my respondents, a viewer of Thai and Indonesian soaps, Aunty R unequivocally rejected the stance of the authorities as an obtrusive control over her life:

I don’t care. Please stop telling me what to do. I am not a child anymore. I don’t think this soap will teach me to do wrong things. If they insist that it is bad for me, then they must prove it with reasonable evidence! Otherwise, please shut up (in a mock stern voice). Even, my parents do not dictate what I can or cannot do. And if my parents do have some advice to give me, they are open and reasonable (Aunty R, 35, Human Resource Officer, Urban – 25.2.2009).

Aunty R is not sympathetic to the overtly paternalistic attitude of the authorities, rejecting it as an infringement of her personal liberty and an insult to her ability as an adult. Further, she perceives such negative attitudes as half-baked pronouncements that have no concrete evidence. She argues that even her parents, who have the greatest authority in her life, treat her with more consideration in giving her advice on personal issues.

While the above respondent objected to the stance of authorities as control over her personal life in a more spontaneous fashion, Aunty H takes a broader perspective on this issue, to reconcile this paternalistic mode in the authorities to the question of women’s status in Malay society:

I think living in the contemporary world has its demands. I personally idolise the character of Yoo Jin because she inspired me...
to work independently while running my private business. Can you see how women can survive in Korean society? I think the government should allow women to be more independent. What would happen if my husband died and there was no one to look after my children? (Aunty H, 48, Homemaker/Grocery Owner, Kampung – 16.2.2009).

Holding the character of Yoo Jin in the Korean soap Winter Sonata as a personal heroine, Aunty H claims that these soaps provide her with the inspiration to improve her life by exercising greater personal independence and taking on more responsibilities. She criticises the local authorities for curbing the possible avenues of freedom that women could claim for themselves by seeking greater independence in their own lives. She reasons that the authorities are not only curtailing women's freedom by dictating to them in a matter as trivial as watching the soap of their choice, but also cutting off women from the possibilities of emulating the heroines to claim greater independence.

A respondent in the last section argues for the difference between adat and Islam to alleviate some of the problems caused when Islamic codes are enforced as stringent social norms. Aunty E cited the difference between the two for another purpose. The local authorities deem the practice of supernatural themes in the Indonesian soaps as contrary to Islamic faith. But a kampung woman Aunty E who believes in practices like faith healing and witchcraft, cited her knowledge of Malay traditions of such practice to claim that authorities cannot ban these as being contrary to Malay cultural values:
I love watching *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. I have no problem with the depiction of magic in this *sinetron* (Indonesian soap). Well, you see supernatural practice is part of our Malay culture. It is also mentioned somewhere in the holy Koran. We also have magical legends in our tradition although it is not so exaggerated like the ones in *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. Why should we forget that part of our tradition? It is also part of our *adat*! (Aunty E, 37, School Teacher, *Kampung* – 8.2.2009).

Aunty E cites her knowledge of *adat* in an instance of strategic disobedience to claim that supernatural practice is not against Malay cultural norms. She argues that local authorities have failed to appreciate the place of supernatural practices in Malay tradition by marginalising *adat* in their ideology of Islamic revivalism.

These respondents consistently point out the loopholes in the wisdom of the authorities and stage a strategic disobedience against their paternalistic stance. In an interesting response Aunty G even questioned the moral authority of these government voices in criticising foreign soaps at all:

Have you watched our local soaps lately? I think it is worse than Korean soaps. Have you watched *Anak Betong* (Son of Betong) and *Kliwon* on television? There are so themes of the supernatural in these local soaps just like *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. The government also encourages the production of similar soaps. At least the imported soaps are more interesting than our local soaps. If they are worried about the ill-effect of foreign soaps, they should
stop talking too much and come out with good local programmes
for us to watch (Aunty G, 46, Homemaker, Kampung - 11.2.2009).

Aunty G argues that if the authorities were really concerned about the corruptive
effect of imported soaps, then it is their responsibility to produce appropriate local
content capable of attracting Malay. She sarcastically points out that the local
soaps produced by the state are not only imitating these imported non-Western
soaps, but some of them have content that is even more questionable than the
foreign soaps which the authorities keep criticising. Aunty G is critical but quite
restrained when she asks the authorities to glance over their own activities before
they criticise non-Western soaps.

Aunty S made the most contentious allegation on this issue by claiming that the
local authorities are only trying to gain political mileage out of a trivial issue:

I find it quite ridiculous that they react negatively every time a
particular program becomes popular. I would like to ask these
people like Puteri UMNO to stop treating me like a child. I know
what I’m doing. Don’t worry about me too much (smiling). I feel
that they just want to attract people’s attention (Aunty S, 38,
Information System Officer, Urban - 25.2.2009).

Aunty S feels licensed by her maturity as an adult with knowledge of the Malay
political landscape to claim that all this controversy over such a trivial issue is
only raised by authorities like UMNO to gain attention in the media. Quite cynical
about the politics of these local bodies like UMNO, she suggests that they
proclaim themselves as moral guardians of the masses in order to retain their
position in Malay society. Aunty S’s expression of strategic disobedience is perhaps a fitting note on which to conclude how Malay women exercise watching competency to negotiate the content of these non-Western soaps by claiming their adult capacity. Finally, I would like to reiterate the argument that various depictions of modernity on these non-Western soaps do not endanger the cultural integrity of Malay women. Instead, they strategically negotiate the depictions of modernity on the soaps by interpreting the content of the soaps through a worldview formed by their cultural resources.
CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION

Non-Western soaps have emerged as a potent site to engage with modernity in contemporary Malaysia. As a vehicle of consumer culture, a platform for escapism and a channel for mediated reality, soaps are now a dominant site for women to derive ideas of modernity in the now realised dream of the Malay state for a Malay middle class and capitalist development of the economy. Although the Malaysian government promoted these non-Western soap operas to counter the influence of Western, especially American popular culture, the Malaysian government’s attitude to these soaps has changed over the last decade. The government has spoken out against the capacity of non-Western soaps to erode the cultural integrity of the Malay life-world. As I argued in the previous chapters, the major concern of the local authorities relates to the potential of these soaps to bring foreign cultural influences, regardless of some degree of shared socio-cultural similarities with these non-Western locations. As a result, the state is often apprehensive that its vision of an alternative non-Western Malay modernity — of being economically developed but cultural rooted in tradition — will be jeopardised. At the end of this study, we can see the different aspects that govern this conflict of modernity.

By locating this conflict over definitions of modernity in soap operas, my study identifies the arena of popular culture as a potent site for the construction of meanings of modernity in Malaysia. In contrast to previous sites for encountering modernity, such as participating in government’s industrialization projects as workforce, it is difficult for the government to directly monitor the attitudes and ideas people derive from watching television programs in the private space. Women have unfettered access to these non-Western soaps within the private
space of their homes and can draw meanings of modernity from these soaps that could potentially challenge the state’s directives. This study also demonstrates Stiven’s observation about how women still continue to be deployed as metaphors for the contradictory aspects of modernity. While the government stresses the need for women to draw ideas and images for a non-Western modernity from these non-Western soaps, they also fear the erosion of bonds of local culture. The consumption of non-Western soaps has become a pertinent site to examine the modes of involvement of subjects with a capitalist modernity guided by the state and the issues arising therein. It can be seen as a site for contestation over the meaning of modernity in Malaysia between the state’s top-down vision and the cultural exchanges taking place at the grassroots level through the channel of mediated popular culture.

At the heart of this conflict about modernity and the challenge it poses to local culture is the deterritorialisation of imagination of Malay audiences. In order to examine this dilemma about Malay women and the potential of deterritorialisation of imagination, I have proposed the concept of watching competencies. Malay women in my research have shown that place the discourses of adat and Islamic values at the centre of their worldview through which they establish critical watching competencies. But they reconstitute these discourses of Malay tradition with their own interpretations to claim them as their cultural resources. Through my empirical data, I have shown how urban and rural Malay women continuously turn to these cultural resources to negotiate the portrayals of modernity and pleasure of watching these soaps by exercising these watching competencies. Malay women express pleasure in the images and discourses of modernity projected by popular culture without necessarily ignoring the cultural expectations of the Malay world. Malay women adapt certain elements to suit their everyday
life. They also completely distance themselves from any elements which contradict the local culture.

In this closing chapter, I would also like to conclude how this study especially the concept of ‘watching competencies’ can make a significant contribution to the field of women studies, popular culture, audience and cultural studies through its investigation of the consumption of global popular culture and the relationship between Malay women and the state in contemporary Malaysia.

With watching competencies, these Malay women have revealed something important about the continually negotiated and hybrid nature of the Malaysian modernity. To understand modernity in Malaysia, we should focus more on how it is understood and conceptualized in the local context because modernity has malleable meaning which changes according to how it is perceived in different contexts. Until now, scholars have often relegated the use of the term ‘alternative modernity’ to characterize projects of modernity in non-Western nations that valorise modes that that circumvent Western models. I too have also used the term to characterise the Malaysian state’s policy. In writing the chapters of this work, I can see that the practice of watching competencies could also extend the concept of alternative modernity to alternative modes of articulation of modernity at the grassroots level. By adapting ideas or images of modernity derived from global popular culture to their worldviews, Malay women also derive their own ideas of modernity that defy generalizing definitions of modernity as breaking away from tradition. They also devise their own interpretations that defy the unilinear ideologies of the state’s vision of non-Western modernity. The Malaysian authorities could provide various discourses, policies and facilities to guide Malay women, but the mode of their engagement cannot be pinned down. It is a subtle,
fragmented process of reception that circumvents the unilinear ideologies of the state’s version. Seen from this perspective, it is also a mode of articulation and experience at the grassroots level. Thus, alternative modernity is not a cohesive set of ideologies but characterised by shifting perceptions and motives that create different meanings of modernity. Such an understanding of alternative modernity as modes of articulation accommodates the differences between Malay women in the *kampung* from urban Malay women and the difference in the response of one participant from another.

To some extent, this contestation over meanings of modernity in non-Western soaps-viewing also highlights the tensions between the patriarchal order of state and its female subjects. From the responses in the field, I can see that Malay women struggle for their voice but also accept the fact that they cannot cross cultural boundaries of the Malay society. Malay women’s adherence to what they understand as the foundations of Malay cultural life illustrates that these women have a desire to engage with a modern space without necessarily transgressing the patriarchal boundaries set by the cultural order. Malay women at the grassroots level of remote village and urban areas still strongly adhere to cultural norms of Malay *adat* and Islamic values. Instead of categorically labelling the audiences as submissive or resistive we need to stress the modes of negotiation that overlap into different categories. Their strong attachment to these elements has highlighted the complexity of media consumption, requiring a framework like watching competencies to explain the engagement of Malay women with modernity. A number of concepts such as cultural proximity (Iwabuchi 2002a; 2004a) and identification and distancing (Chua 2008) have opened up ways to analyse transnational consumption of non-Western soap operas and popular culture especially from Korean and Japan (see especially volumes by Chua and
Iwabuchi 2008; Iwabuchi 2002a; Iwabuchi 2004a; Iwabuchi, Muecke and Thomas 2004). However, they only focus on East Asian-Confucian societies and do not highlight such subtleties of the engagement of local audiences in specific Islamic settings. Instead of simply claiming identification and distancing, as commonly suggested by some local and foreign scholars, Malay women’s watching activity is a matter of negotiation that spreads into overlapping fields. I would also like to suggest that watching competencies can also be proposed as a new framework to study television audience in Asia particularly in the Muslim countries.

Non-Western soap operas can be conceptualised as a site of struggle of authorisation, where women exercise watching competencies to juggle, claim and reclaim their adherence to cultural expectations of the Malay society. This process of watching soaps can be seen as a manifestation of what is within and what is outside Malay culture. This in itself reveals something crucial about the hybrid or continually renegotiated nature of the Malaysian modernity. As I mentioned earlier, modernity in Malaysia has not profoundly transformed tradition in the same way that it has in many Western countries. Instead, modernity in Malaysia is judged through the perspective of tradition and it involves many processes of negotiation and renegotiation with the past.
ENDNOTES

1 Adat refers to traditional Malay customs that guide social behavior and life matters in everyday life.

2 UMNO or United Malay National Organization was founded in 1946. It has been in government in Malaysia through national coalition party, the Barisan Nasional or National Front, since independence. See Crouch (1996).

3 Founded in 1947, Wanita UMNO is the women’s wing of UMNO. In its early years, Wanita UMNO was also known as Kaum Ibu. See Manderson (1980).

4 Shallots and Garlic.

5 Puteri UMNO is also a women’s wing of UMNO (United Malays National Organization).

6 Midday, mid-afternoon and sunset prayers.

7 Pearl of the heart

8 Mukjizat is derived from the Arabic term Mu’jizah, which means miracle, used to signify the miraculous acts associated with the prophets who brought God’s message to his people.

9 Angel.

10 UMNO youth is the young men’s wing of UMNO.

11 Introduced by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdullah Badawi, Islam Hadhari was promoted as a model of ideas and plans that would create a modern Islamic country in Malaysia. See Chong (2005).

12 Islamic law defines a set code for consumption practices and social behavior in everyday life. Some items like pork, alcohol and some practices like singing or drawing portraits are forbidden and designated as haram. Things that are permitted by Islamic law are called halal.

13 While the popularity of non-Western soaps in Malaysia will create an interest toward in the analysis of ratings in order to illustrate audience share for different genres of programs on television, to identify, in particular, how these shows are regularly viewed by the Malay audiences especially women in specific age range, I have to argue here that the constitution of popularity, as claimed by many popular culture theorists, is not straightforward. In fact, what constitutes ‘popular’ should be understood in terms of cultural features of the environment as well as methodological setting. According to Lewis (2002: 282-283), there are several techniques which have been employed by the media industry to measure the popularity of specific cultural texts, including computerized recording systems through TV ‘people meters’. AGB Nielsen is well known for applying this technique for measuring the popularity of specific television program on television. Website visits or ‘hits’ can also be used to identify ‘popularity’ of cultural text over any given time period. Apparently, these techniques are useful to study popularity but it is insufficient to evaluate specific ‘phenomenon’ which usually came out later as a major outcome. In other words, presenting daily specific rating figure of specific television program does not confirm that it is becoming a phenomenon among audiences. In my study, non-Western soap operas is a ‘phenomenon’ because it is not only popular amongst the Malay audience, but has also became a major subject for the local authorities especially UMNO through which to criticise Malay women for ignoring their domestic tasks and communal activities. The conduct of Wanita UMNO’s members who were too busy watching Bawang Putih Bawang Merah and ignoring their responsibility at the UMNO’s national general meeting, for example, can be interpret as a new social phenomenon which are hard-pressed to explain.

14 It means acceptable or permitted.
In terms of theorising research outcome, David Morley in his audience research of the television magazine *Nationwide* notes that while portending to study the process of meaning making, scholars tend to simplify the outcomes into easy, predictable categories that misrepresented the actually fragmented nature of audiences (Morley 1980). Along these lines, Ann Gray (1999) notes that the notion of ‘active audience’ is used in explaining audience behaviour in countless studies, and this represents one such example of an over-simplification of audience theory. Further, she notes that the popularity of audience research not only produces oversimplified conclusions but adds to the repetitive literature that contribute nothing to elucidating audience behaviour in the end.

Another pivotal work in developing audience research especially in its application to watching soap operas is Robert C. Allen’s influential writing on reader-oriented criticism, which falls under the general philosophical position of phenomenology. In examining the role of the readers and how they make sense and derive pleasure from cultural texts he suggests that *reader-oriented criticism* is valuable for analysing media responses because ‘...the meaning of a literary text does not reside in any absolute sense within the text itself. Rather, texts are made to have meaning by readers as they read’ (Allen 1992: 102). Although Allen’s work is important in developing audience research particularly for understanding the construction of meaning by audiences across cultures, I will focus more on cultural studies paradigm as scholarly context from which audience ethnography as an important research methodology arose. I will explain this later in chapter five.

As I explained later in the methodology section, there are two techniques – purposeful sampling and snowballing – to identify potential respondents.

*Village.*

*Melayu Baru* or new Malay is a term coined by the former Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohammad, to refer to his vision of creating a class of educated middle class Malays who would lead the modernisation of the nation. See Embong (2002).

It was happened in May 13th 1969 due to racial tension specifically in terms of political and economic domination. See Crouch (1996).

Missionary work for Islam.

Islamic law.

*Kaum Ibu* is another named used for the women section of UMNO or Wanita UMNO. See Manderson (1977).

The proverb “Let the Custom die, but not the child” is actually inverted from the original Malay proverb “Let the Child die, but not the Custom”. According to Harper (1999), the early Malay women’s movement inverted this proverb in order to promote healthcare awareness amongst Malay women. It sought to encourage Malay women to step out of their homes and take measures whatever measure necessary, even if they violated societal norms, when their child’s health was at stake. See Karim (1992) and Stivens (1996).

It is the collection of the Prophet Muhammad’s statement and action.

Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia and deputy President of UMNO was charged with sexual impropriety and corruption and this led to political instability in Malaysia, especially affecting the stability of the UMNO. See Gomez (2007).

*keAdilan* or justice was established by the followers of Anwar Ibrahim who sought to reform UMNO and formed a new wing of the party to challenge the old UMNO. The first president of keAdilan was Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah, the wife of Anwar Ibrahim. See Gomez (2007).
Reformasi or reformation was a mass movement initiated by Anwar Ibrahim and his followers to challenge the status quo and the somewhat conservative policies of the present UMNO-led government. See Gomez (2007).

An Islamic scholar, who has the authority to issue legal views and opinions.

Stivens (1996) talks about the impact of modernity on the tradition of matriliney amongst the Minang population in Negri Sembilan, Malaysia.

Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM).

Trend-based youth-oriented drama. It has been called trendy drama because of various depictions of urban lifestyles and popular culture consumption. See Iwabuchi (2002).

My respondents reject images of romance in the non-Western soaps as amounting to promiscuous sexuality and reject it as haram (forbidden).

Kota Tinggi is a small remote town in the southern Malaysian Peninsula, which consist of a large number of unorganised and organised Malay village settlement. Kota Tinggi is also well known with the organised Malay settlement particularly FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) which initiated by the former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, as part of the national plan under the NEP (New Economic Policy). FELDA can be considered as a village because of its remote location. In fact, most of FELDA residents still strongly practice traditional Malay culture such as gotong royong (volunteer work). Kota Tinggi is located approximately 42 kilometres to the capital city state of Johore – Johor Bahru and can be reached easily by ferry from Changi Airport Terminal of Singapore. This area also has a very clear reception of Singapore and Indonesia free to air television channel which consistently broadcast many Asian soap opera. For more information about FELDA, see Lie & Lund (1994).

Kuala Lumpur is the capital city of Malaysia.

Through this thesis, I use the term Aunty which seems to be the English equivalent for Makcik.

This system of identification should be read as: respondent’s pseudo name, age, job, location and date of interview).

In Islam, dogs are always seen as haram and under specific circumstances, touching this animal is strictly forbidden.

JAKIM is an acronym for Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (The Department of Islamic Development).

Reform movement. See Frisk (2009)

She is the daughter of the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. Marina Mahathir is well known as a leader and activist for the local feminist movement and NGOs.

She is a feminist and NGOs activist and prominent leader of the Malaysian Muslim feminist association, Sister in Islam (SIS).

Sinetron is an acronym for Sinema Elektronik (Electronic cinema). It is a commonly used term for Indonesian soap operas. See Ida (2006).

Kenduri or kenduri-kendara is a communal feast given at occasions of birth, marriage or death, where all the members of the neighbourhood contribute to the workload.

Halal/Haram is a binary concept of unforbidden/forbidden in Islam, lays down the rules for what can be consumed or not by practicing Muslims. See Fischer (2008).
Halal Industry Development Corporation or HDC was established in 2006 to assist the Malaysian government to position Malaysia as the global halal hub and industry. See http://www.hdcglobal.com/

In Malay society, *santun* meaning 'propriety', is a concept which sets the parameters of ideal behaviour for women.

The concept of feminine beauty in traditional Malay culture is seen as being inseparable from *akhlak yang mulia* (good behaviour). See Omar (1994). A beautiful woman is characterized by devotion to her role as a wife and a mother. She must be loyal and respectful, attractive, clean and well groomed. While this age of glamorous film and soap heroines has introduced notions of physical attractiveness as a measure of feminine beauty, most of my respondents still subscribed to the traditional notion of feminine beauty as the attribute of a devoted wife and mother, loyal and respectful, attractive, clean and well groomed.

*Rosalinda* is a famous Mexican *telenovela*.

This includes lipstick, foundation make-up, perfume, toner, moisturizer, talcum powder, medical cream etc.

In Malaysia, Jakim or Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development) undertaking the responsibility of inspecting production facilities and issuing halal certificates.

Bawang Merah is a lead female character in the famous Indonesian soap *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah*.

In Islam, *aurat* refer to the physical and non-physical attributes of femininity. See Hasyim (2005) and Omar (1994).

Unlike the traditional Malay *tudung*, which covers the hair, neck and most of the chest area, Indonesian *tudung* is smaller and only covers the hair and neck.

Some of the statues come in the form of ancient Hindu God.

Yoo Rin is a lead female character of the Korean soap opera *My Girl*.

*Wang hantaran* is similar to a dowry. The amount is decided after a consultation between the families of the groom and the bride.

*Sudah masak* or already cooked is a Malay idiom, referring to a mature adult capable of leading their life. It is normally employed to describe someone about to get married, participate in an important ritual or get employment. See Karim (1992).

*Sudah makan garam dulu* or "tasted salt" is a Malay proverb to signify the status of maturity in the Malay society. See Karim (1992).

*Mentah* literally meaning raw is used to refer to someone who is still young and needs guidance. See Karim (1992).

*Belum rasa garam* or have not tasted salt is an idiom in Malay used to indicate that a person is immature and needs to learn more about life. See Karim (1992).

Koranic verse means the chapters in the Koran.

*Bomoh* is a shaman adept in traditional rituals and medical practices.

Islamic law also known as Syariah law is based on Islamic values derived from the holy Koran and *Hadith* (spoken word of the prophet Mohamed).
REFERENCES


NSW: Asian Studies Association of Australia in Association with ALLEN & UNWIN.


Appendices
APPENDIX 1
(PROFILE OF KAMPUNG’S RESPONDENTS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants/date of interview</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Status/education/profession</th>
<th>Soap’s preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Aunty A/18/1/2009</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Married/primary school/homemaker</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Aunty B/20/1/2009</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Married/secondary and religious school/homemaker</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Aunty C/3/2/2009</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Married/primary school/homemaker</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Aunty F/9/2/2009</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Married/secondary and religious school/homemaker</td>
<td>South Korean/Indonesian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Aunty I/17/2/2009</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Married/secondary and religious school/homemaker and active in women society</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(PROFILE OF URBAN’S RESPONDENTS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants/date of interview</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Status/education/profession</th>
<th>Soap’s preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16. Aunty P/24/2/2009</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Single/university graduated/bank officer</td>
<td>South Korean/Filipino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Aunty R/25/2/2009</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Single/university graduate/human resource officer</td>
<td>Thai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Aunty S/25/2/2009</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Married/university graduate/information system officer</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 2

IN-DEPTH/FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW (PILOT TEST)

Profile of Respondent

1. What is your ‘anonymous’ name?
2. Age?
3. Status?
   • Single
   • Married
   • Others. Please specify _________
4. Number of children?
   • One
   • More than one? Please specify _______
   • None
5. Level of education?
   • No formal education
   • Primary school
   • Secondary school
   • College/Polytechnic
   • University
   • Others (stated) ____________
6. The period of staying in this place
   • Live permanently
   • 5 – 10 years
   • 10 – 15 years
   • Less than 5 years
7. A description about the place you live
   • City
   • Suburb
   • Village/rural
   • Others (Please specify) _________

8. Occupation
   • Full time home makers (not working)
   • Pensioner
   • Part time home makers (working part time)
   • Self-employed
   • Government
   • Others (please specify) _________

9. Husband’s occupation
   • Self-employed
   • Pensioner
   • Government
   • Unemployed
   • Others (Please specify) _________

10. Do you love watching television?
    Please specify ________________

11. How many televisions set you have at home? _________________

12. Do you have VCD player?
    • Yes
    • No

13. Do you have satellite television access?
    • Yes
    • No
Television and Everyday Culture

1. You do most of the housework?
   - Yes
   - No (please specify who helps you?) ________________________

2. Have you done anything else when you watch television?
   - Yes (Please specify) ______________________________________
     - No (please state why?) _______________________

3. Do you talk to somebody when you watch television?
   - Yes (who, please specify) ____________________________
     - No (why, please specify) ____________________________

4. Do you feel comfortable if there is no television set at home?
   - Yes (why, please specify) ____________________________
     - No (why, please specify) ____________________________

Soap operas as Popular Culture

1. Do you love to watch foreign soaps?
   - Yes (why?)
   - No (why?)

2. How frequent do you watch foreign soaps?
   - Everyday?
   - Sometimes

3. Which soaps do you think better?
   - East Asian (Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese) Please specify, why?
   - Western (Hollywood) Please specify, why?
   - Regional (Indonesian, Thais, Filipino) Please specify, why?
   - Latin America (Brazilian, Mexican) Please specify, why?
4. Do you talk about your favourite soaps with anyone?
   • Yes (to whom & where, please specify)
     ________________________
   • No (why, please specify) ________________________
5. Are they following the same soaps you watch?
   • Yes (who, please specify) ________________________
   • No (why, please specify) ________________________
6. Do you ever laugh when you are watching your favourite soaps?
   • Yes (when – in the narrative, please specify)
     ________________________
   • No (why, please specify) ________________________
7. Have you ever cried?
   • Yes (when – please specify which narrative)
     ________________________
   • No (why, please specify) ________________________
8. Which character is your most favourite in any soaps you watch?
9. Have you bought any vcd/dvd of your favourite soaps?
   • Yes (which one? Why?)
   • No
10. Based on soaps you watch] if you have chance to go to any particular country, where would you love to go?
   • Where and why?

**Audience reception**

1. What is the first soaps you remember watching?(please specify title and year)
2. What do you think good about watching soaps?
3. Which soaps do you prefer ?
   • The first time you watch (why?)
   • The current soaps you watch (why?)
4. Which do you like best, the intense emotional scenes such as sad and romantic, or the family reunion scenes (like being together again after missing many years)?
   - Emotional scene (why?)
   - Romantic (why?)
   - Family (why?)

5. Do you enjoy loving and hating particular characters in the soaps you watch?
   - Yes (why?)
   - No (why?)

6. Do you think the soaps’ characters like real people?
   - Yes (why?)
   - No (why?)

7. Do your children watch soaps? Which one?
   - Yes (please specify whom)
   - No (Please specify why)

**Transnational cultural flows**

1. Have you tried to follow any positive elements you have seen on soaps that you watched? Do you mind to give some example?
   - Yes (please stated and why?)
   - No (please stated and why)

2. Have you ever watched any particular inappropriate scene in any soaps? What are they? Do you think it is alright to watch them? Do you think Malay like that?
   - Yes (Please stated and why – Please answer question no 3)
   - No (Please stated and why – go to the question no 7)

3. If yes, how did you watch it? Alone or accompanied by someone else?

4. Do you feel embarrassed?
   - Yes (Why?)
   - No (Why?)
5. Have anyone disallowed you to watch those scenes?
   • Yes (whom and why?)
   • No (why?)

6. Do you still keep watching any particular soaps if it still contain any inappropriate scenes?
   • Yes (why)
   • No (why)

7. Have you seen any differences between our culture and theirs?
   • Yes (Why?)
   • No (Why?)

**Hegemony and Patriarchal Discourse**

1. Do you like the men character in your favorite soaps?
   • Yes (why?)
   • No (why?)

2. Do you have any favorite woman character? Why do you like her?

3. Do you think your favourite women character very modern? Why?

4. Do you think she is beautiful?
   • Yes (Why?)
   • No (Why?)

5. Do you want to be like her?
   • Yes (Why)
   • No (Why)

6. Do you think this woman character is less or more powerful rather than man character? If yes/no, why?
   • Yes (why?)
   • No (why?)
7. Do you think watching soaps is waste of time?
   - Yes (Why?)
   - No (why?)
APPENDIX 3

Question for in-depth interview (final)
Profile of the respondents: Kampung / Urban (please circle)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>*Soaps preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Which soap opera, not the location of soap originality

Introduction

1. Which one in the foreign soaps is more foreignness in the sense of your everyday life?

2. What inspired you to watch this soap? Is that because they are totally not same like us (very foreign)? Or is that because they are similar like us (Asianness/familiar foreignness)?

3. Do you mind to give me some example (if you say Asianness/familiar foreignness) Are they strong or weak foreignness? (Scenery, background songs, language, cultural background, people?)

4. Which are you comfortable with, dubbing or subtitling soaps?

The theme

The following themes were generated through early pilot test finding – most of informants structuring their consumption through the process of identifying and distancing. Interestingly, they have tendency to relate the text with their own life.

Romance/pleasure

1. Do you think everlasting love in Korean soaps is okay with you? I mean, does a man should fall in love with one girl forever?

2. I know soaps are very touching, but why only soaps? Is there any program that you think very touching as well?

3. Is that okay if your kid fall in love to someone in the early age? Let’s say, the one who attend secondary school.
Family

1. Do you think young generation today should be more respectful to their old man? Should they behave like Yoo Jin and Ju-Sang in Winter Sonata? Do you have any problem to look after your kids?

2. What do you think about living as a family? Do you think family is very important to you? How do you keep your family united?

Magic and supernatural

1. Do you believe in magic and supernatural? Do you think the practice of black magic such as in Bawang Putih Bawang Merah is still happening today? Have you heard any story lately about magic in the neighbourhood?

2. Do you think practicing magic against Islam? Is there any advantage of practicing magic?

3. What do you think about learning Islam through soap opera? (For example, religious Indonesian soaps). Do you think this is okay?

Identity/value

1. What kind of cosmetic are you using at home? Can you tell me what brand (same as the one you see on soaps)?

2. Are you always wearing tudung (veil) anytime you go for outing?

3. Have you heard about kim chi (popular Korean meals) or nasi uduk (popular Indonesian meals)?

4. Do you think this character is really Asian?

5. Do you think adat still important when you watch television? Do you think Korean and Indonesian got adat of their won? How you negotiate your adat when you watch television?

6. Give me some examples of adat that you always to use when you watching television.

Conclusion

1. Is that okay to watch soaps? Have you heard anything about negative values of foreign soaps?
APPENDIX 4

Design and Social Context Portfolio
School of Applied Communication

Plain Language Statement to be used in a research project involving human participation

Dear …………………

My name is Md Azalanshah Md Syed.

I am undertaking a PhD by research in the school of Applied Communication at RMIT University. The title of my research is: “Imagining Transnational Modernity: Foreign Soaps, Malay women and the Modern World.”

The purpose of my project is to examine of how foreign soap operas construct imagining transnational pleasure and the sense of being modern to the Malay women. Malaysia has been chosen as the primary setting for this research. Part of my research involves speaking to the Malay women who were believed love to watch evening and prime time soaps regularly. I hope to speak to the most appropriate, interested and willing Malay women who can share their foreign soaps watching experience and how they treat soaps as tool to feel the sense of being modern. The result of this interview will provide the pattern of viewing toward transnational cultural flow through television text.

Why have you been approached?
You have been approached as a possible interviewee in this project, as someone who has some knowledge of foreign soaps watching experience. Your participation will contribute significant information to the academia and scholar who might have interest to know in details about the flow of transnational culture and modernisation through soaps operas in the Malay world mainly in sociological perspective. The research finding also might be useful to the Malaysian government as some of their policies which is associated to television content need to be revisited.

What is expected of you and how long will it take?
The interview process will involve an interview of approximately one hour. You will be asked about your foreign soaps watching experience and how you make sense of them in everyday life. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any stage. After the interviews have been completed, you will be sent copies of relevant segments of the written thesis in which you are directly quoted, for your final approval prior to inclusion in the thesis.
Privacy and Disclosure of Information

Your name, age, and any other personal details will not be included in the writing up of the research, so you will remain anonymous at all times. The information collected for this study will only be accessed by me and my supervisor (see below), and will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet during the study and for five years after its completion. It will then be securely disposed of. Reports from the research will be included as part of my PhD thesis and may contribute to academic conference presentations and publications.

Should you have any questions or concerns now or at any stage about the research you can contact me or my supervisor:

Md Azalanshah Md Syed
(Primary Researcher)
Research student, School of Applied Communications, RMIT University
0411565927
md.mdsyed@student.rmit.edu.au

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Chris Hudson
Senior Supervisor
Phone: + (61 3) 9925 2904
Email: chris.hudson@rmit.edu.au

Dr. Brian Morris
Postgraduate Research Coordinator, School of Applied Communication
Phone: 9925 3882
Email: brian.morris@rmit.edu.au

Yours sincerely,

Md Azalanshah Md Syed
PhD Research Student, School of Applied Communication

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Executive Officer, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, Research & Innovation, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V Melbourne, 3001. Details of the complaints procedure are available at: www.rmit.edu.au/rd/hrec_complaints
Design and Social Context Portfolio  
School of Applied Communication  

Kenyataan ringkas yang akan digunapakai dalam kajian yang melibatkan manusia  

Kepada …………………

Selamat sejahtera. Nama saya ialah Md Azalanshah Md Syed.

Saya sedang mengikuti pengajian di peringkat PhD (penyelidikan) di school of Applied Communication, RMIT University, Australia. Untuk pengetahuan pihak Cik/Puan, tajuk penyelidikan ini ialah “Imaginasi dunia moden transnasional: Drama import, wanita Melayu dan dunia moden.”

Tujuan penyelidikan ini adalah untuk mengkaji penerimaan drama televisyen import di kalangan penonton wanita Melayu di Malaysia. Kedekatan sebahagian besar wanita Melayu dengan hobi menonton televisyen drama yang diimport telah menjadi satu rutin dan sering diperdebatkan. Kajian ini juga akan menghasilkan pengetahuan baru mengenai paten tontonan dan amalan menonton drama television yang diimport di kalangan audiens Melayu.

Mengapa Cik/Puan dipilih? 
Cik/Puan dipilih kerana Cik/Puan gemar menonton televisyen drama yang diimport. Ini bermakna Cik/Puan boleh berkongsi maklumat tentang aktiviti tersebut. Penglibatan Cik/Puan akan menyumbang maklumat penting kepada dunia akademik khususnya tentang pengaliran budaya asing dan tindak balas komuniti Melayu terhadap proses modernisasi. Kajian ini turut berguna kepada kerajaan Malaysia kerana beberapa polisi yang melibatkan kandungan televisyen perlu disemak semula.

Bagaimana Cik/Puan boleh membantu dan berapa lama proses ini akan mengambil masa? 
Proses temuramah ini akan mengambil masa lebih kurang satu jam. Cik/Puan akan diminta berkongsi tentang pengalaman menonton televisyen drama yang diimport di kaca televisyen setiap hari dan bagaimana Cik/Puan menyesuaikannya dalam aktiviti kehidupan sehari. Cik/Puan bebas memilih untuk tidak ditemuramah. Sebaik sahaja temuramah ini selesai, Cik/Puan akan diberikan salinan yang berkaitan dengan tesis penyelidikan ini khususnya setiap kenyataan yang tuturkan sepanjang temuramah berlangsung.

Kerahsiaan maklumat
Nama, umur dan lain-lain kerincian peribadi Cik/Puan tidak akan dimasukkan ke dalam kajian ini. Oleh itu, identiti Cik/Puan akan diletakkan sebagai dirahsia. Maklumat yang dikumpul untuk kajian ini hanya boleh diuruskan oleh penyelidik dan penyelia (sila lihat dibawah), dan ia akan disimpan di dalam setor berkunci.
Selepas lima tahun semua maklumat ini akan dimusnahkan. Laporan hasil penyelidikan ini akan menjadi sebahagian daripada tesis PhD penyelidik dan kertas kerja untuk tujuan persidangan dan penerbitan rasmi atau tidak rasmi.

Jika Cik/Puan mempunyai sebaran pertanyaan tentang apa-apa jua mengenai penyelidikan ini, Cik/Puan boleh menghubungi penyelidik atau penyelia melalui:

**Md Azalanshah Md Syed**
(Primary Researcher)
Research student, School of Applied Communications, RMIT University
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md.mdsyed@student.rmit.edu.au

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**Dr. Brian Morris**
Postgraduate Research Coordinator, School of Applied Communication
Phone: 9925 3882
Email: brian.morris@rmit.edu.au

Yang benar,

Md Azalanshah Md Syed
PhD. Research Student, School of Applied Communication

Sebarang aduan mengenai penglibatan anda dalam projek ini boleh diajukan terus kepada: Secretary, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, University Secretariat, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 1745Maklumat lengkap tentang prosedur aduan boleh didapati melalui: www.rmit.edu.au/rd/hrec_complaints