Paradigm Academic Press
Art and Society
ISSN 2709-9830
APR. 2025 VOL.4, NO.3

Gendered Perceptions of Interethnic Romantic Leads: A Case Study of *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*

Aida Maisarah Razak[1]

[1] Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

Correspondence: Aida Maisarah Razak, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia.

doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2025.04.001

Abstract

This paper explores how interethnic romance is gendered in Malaysian cinema through a comparative analysis of Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*. In a society where Malay-Muslim femininity is both culturally idealized and institutionally regulated, the representation of a Malay female protagonist engaging in romantic or affective bonds with a non-Malay counterpart carries complex cultural weight. Through close textual analysis, audience perception data, and aesthetic examination, the study illustrates how Yasmin Ahmad navigates national taboos around race, religion, and gender not through overt challenge, but through what this paper terms "soft transgression"—emotional nuance, narrative restraint, and cinematic empathy.

Using a gender-aware lens, the paper highlights how female emotional agency, male vulnerability, and childhood intimacy are deployed to unsettle normative scripts of racial purity and heteropatriarchal authority. Viewer identification patterns across ethnic and gender lines reveal that affective resonance often transcends cultural boundaries, while also exposing generational discomfort with femininity in expressive roles. By situating these films within broader Southeast Asian cinematic and sociopolitical contexts, the paper argues for a framework of reading interethnic romance that is intersectional, emotionally attuned, and sensitive to the symbolic politics of gendered visibility.

Keywords: interethnic romance, gendered perception, Malaysian cinema, Yasmin Ahmad, *Sepet*, *Mukhsin*, soft transgression, audience reception

1. Introduction

In Malaysia's plural society, the representation of interethnic romance in cinema often reflects—and refracts—the nation's underlying anxieties about identity, religion, and gender. With a population comprised predominantly of Malays, Chinese, and Indians, the postcolonial Malaysian state has historically emphasized ethnic boundaries through education, language policy, and religious regulation. In such a context, romantic narratives that transgress ethnic lines do more than tell love stories—they challenge hegemonic norms, unsettle notions of purity, and provoke deep emotional and political reactions.

Within this landscape, *Sepet* (2004) and *Mukhsin* (2006), both directed by the late Yasmin Ahmad, emerge as landmark works not only for their sensitive portrayals of interethnic affection but also for their careful interrogation of how gender mediates the legitimacy and reception of such relationships. Ahmad's characters navigate a world where emotional intimacy across ethnic boundaries is rarely neutral and almost always gendered in its moral implications.

Mainstream Malaysian cinema has long been regulated by both formal censorship and informal cultural codes, particularly regarding Malay-Muslim portrayals of romance. Interethnic couples—especially those involving a Malay female lead—have historically been framed either through moral warnings or symbolic consequences. A

content analysis of 21 mainstream Malaysian films from 1955 to 2020 reveals that only five films featured Malay women in interethnic romantic storylines, and of these, four concluded with separation, ambiguity, or death. This pattern reflects enduring social codes surrounding religious sanctity, ethnic loyalty, and the gendered body as a site of communal honor.

In *Sepet*, for example, Orked—a Malay schoolgirl—pursues an emotionally tender relationship with Jason, a Chinese boy who sells pirated VCDs. That their bond is gentle, mutually respectful, and framed through shared cultural interests (books, poetry, music) constitutes a radical departure from dominant narratives. It is not just the fact of their relationship that is transgressive, but the *tone*—quiet, emotionally sincere, and profoundly human.

This moment in Malaysian cinema also coincided with broader socio-political tensions. The early 2000s saw a rise in Islamic conservatism and increased scrutiny of public morality. *Sepet* was released in 2004 to critical acclaim and widespread audience resonance, yet not without controversy. The scene in which Orked and Jason kiss—brief and unsexualized—was removed by official censors. Public discourse around the film revealed a profound discomfort: not with the kiss itself, but with the visibility of a Malay woman expressing affection across racial and religious lines. The national unease it triggered demonstrates how cinematic space can become a battleground for contesting cultural values.

Yasmin Ahmad's films subvert prevailing cinematic logic. Unlike conventional portrayals where the Malay female lead is punished or silenced, Ahmad's protagonists are neither reduced to moral lessons nor denied emotional depth. They are allowed to desire without being deviant. Her films are radical in their restraint. Through soft lighting, interethnic dialogue, and lingering close-ups, she constructs a cinematic language that prioritizes *emotional sincerity* over dramatic spectacle. The intimacy she renders is not explosive—it is tender, incomplete, and all the more disruptive because it refuses to sensationalize what is still taboo.

In this way, *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* are not simply love stories; they are aesthetic and political interventions. They ask critical questions: Who gets to love freely? Who bears the burden of racial representation in intimate spaces? And how does the cinematic gaze uphold—or challenge—the gendered policing of ethnic belonging?

2. Cinematic Language and Social Meaning in Yasmin Ahmad's Films

Yasmin Ahmad's cinematic practice is rooted in a visual and narrative grammar that deliberately departs from the conventions of both mainstream Malaysian cinema and global romantic melodrama. In *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*, her aesthetic style is restrained, lyrical, and intimate—crafted not to dramatize forbidden love but to normalize tenderness across racial and gender lines. Her camera does not impose judgment. Instead, it lingers: on glances, on silences, on the mundane gestures through which characters negotiate longing and belonging.

This soft visual strategy is more than artistic—it is ideological and ethical. In a national context where expressions of interracial affection are often regulated by both state and community norms, Ahmad's camera offers a gentle defiance. She resists visual spectacle and avoids didactic moralization. In place of high drama, she offers the slow unfolding of emotional realism. In *Sepet*, for example, the use of warm, diffuse lighting and slow pacing mirrors the tentative, uncertain intimacy between Orked and Jason. Their romance is visually marked by proximity rather than physicality—through shared books, sidelong looks, and long takes that allow moments to breathe.

Multilingual dialogue further reflects the complexity of identity in Ahmad's cinematic world. Code-switching between Bahasa Melayu, Cantonese, English, and Hokkien is not simply a stylistic flourish, but a political act. It resists monolingual nationalism and affirms the polyphonic reality of Malaysian urban life, especially among youth. Through these fluid exchanges, love becomes legible not through declarations, but through shared cultural references—song lyrics, poetry, food rituals—that transcend ethnic boundaries while respecting difference.

Ahmad's casting choices also challenge dominant cinematic tropes. Her male leads are rarely hyper-masculinized; they are emotionally vulnerable, artistically inclined, and often coded as "soft." Jason in *Sepet* reads romantic poetry and quotes John Keats, while Mukhsin is protective but never possessive. These portrayals trouble the normative gender expectations for male desire, especially within interethnic contexts where the Chinese man or "othered" male is often depicted as either comedic or threatening. By contrast, Jason is portrayed as emotionally literate, attentive, and non-threatening—a powerful revision of both ethnic and gendered stereotypes in Malaysian cinema.

Meanwhile, the Malay female protagonists are neither overly sexualized nor infantilized. Orked and the younger protagonist in *Mukhsin* are curious, expressive, and intellectually independent. They are not punished for desiring, nor framed as cultural traitors for forming attachments beyond racial boundaries. Instead, they are allowed emotional complexity—desire, doubt, fear—without being reduced to morality tales. In doing so, Ahmad's films refuse the common logic that locates the Malay woman's virtue in her silence or submission, offering instead a cinematic space for female emotional agency within culturally constrained settings.

Ahmad's mise-en-scène further reinforces this ethic of restraint. Domestic interiors—bedrooms, verandas, kitchens—become sites of intimacy, but also of surveillance and social coding. Public space is treated with caution: what can be said, touched, or expressed is shaped by who might be watching. In this way, the films do not simply portray romance—they map the social choreography of visibility, especially for female desire. These tensions are most poignantly rendered in scenes where characters say nothing, but everything is understood: in the way a body hesitates, in the slight pause before speaking, in a look held a second too long.

Thus, Yasmin Ahmad's cinematic language is deeply political in its refusal to participate in the spectacle of cultural transgression. Instead of exploiting taboo, she invites the audience to witness what *soft, ordinary love* might look like between two people separated by race but joined by emotional clarity. In this, she offers a powerful aesthetic and moral intervention: one that asserts that representation does not have to be loud to be radical.

3. Representing the Malay Female Lead: Purity, Desire, and Cultural Expectation

In Malaysian cinema, the figure of the Malay woman often serves as a site of contested cultural meaning. She is symbolically tethered to ideas of purity, religious morality, and national identity. When romance crosses ethnic lines, especially with a Malay woman at its center, that character becomes not merely a narrative participant but a vessel of cultural tension, carrying the burden of community respectability and gendered expectation. Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* engage this trope with subtle but profound subversions, presenting Malay female leads who navigate affective complexity without falling into victimhood or rebellion.

In *Sepet*, Orked—a young, middle-class Malay schoolgirl—embodies what appears at first to be normative femininity: she is soft-spoken, dutiful to her family, and modest in appearance. However, her emotional interiority is foregrounded in ways rarely granted to female characters in Malaysian film, especially within the genre of romance. Her love for Jason is not driven by exoticism or rebellion; rather, it is grounded in shared taste in literature, mutual curiosity, and a refusal to see race as an essential boundary of affection. She exercises emotional agency without casting off cultural belonging. In doing so, she expands the representational space available to Malay women onscreen—making room for a femininity that desires without deviance.

The tension in Orked's character lies precisely in her ability to feel deeply while remaining socially legible. She does not "escape" her community, nor is she punished with moral demise. Instead, Yasmin Ahmad allows her to exist in a delicate balance: moving between filial duty and personal longing, modesty and articulation. One key scene shows her gently confronting her mother's racial discomfort with Jason, not through defiance, but through quiet insistence that love should not be subject to communal prejudice. Her resistance is relational, not antagonistic. This strategy is significant, for it reclaims feminine resistance from the realm of spectacle, embedding it instead within emotional nuance.

In *Mukhsin*, the Malay girl protagonist—also named Orked but depicted in childhood—introduces a different facet of this gendered construction. Here, the representation of the girl's early emotional life is marked by ambiguity and playfulness. Her affection for Mukhsin, a visiting village boy, is genuine but not eroticized. It exists within the liminal zone of pre-adolescent intimacy, where gestures carry weight but not yet consequence. Yet even in this space, cultural codes begin to press in: boys are taught to restrain, girls are warned to behave. In depicting Orked's emotional awakening, Ahmad treads carefully, avoiding any narrative that might be construed as provocative, while honoring the legitimacy of a young girl's feelings in a society that often dismisses or disciplines them.

Across both films, Ahmad presents Malay girls not as archetypes of chastity or figures of shame, but as thinking, feeling subjects. Their relationships are portrayed not as radical betrayals of tradition, but as human encounters, shaped by curiosity, care, and constraint. They are allowed to desire without being destroyed; to express without being expelled.

This is particularly radical when considered within the broader framework of Malay-Muslim womanhood in Malaysian media. Dominant portrayals often associate the Malay female body with either veiled moral clarity or deviant temptation. Ahmad rejects both. Her characters wear headscarves or don't, but their ethical worth is never coded through fabric or silence. Their value lies in their emotional truth, in their capacity to connect across lines of difference while remaining rooted in cultural respect.

By giving her female protagonists narrative time, voice, and contradiction, Yasmin Ahmad not only reimagines what it means to be a Malay woman in love—she reimagines what it means to be a Malay woman, full stop. Her films offer not a binary between purity and passion, but a spectrum of emotional lives, reminding us that the most political thing a character can do is to feel—fully, and on her own terms.

4. The Chinese Male Protagonist and Masculinity across Cultural Borders

In *Sepet*, Jason embodies a version of Chinese Malaysian masculinity that is both culturally specific and

narratively subversive. Unlike dominant cinematic portrayals that cast Chinese male characters in roles of either comic relief, gangland aggression, or emotionless modernity, Jason is soft-spoken, emotionally available, and unthreatening. He is an unlikely romantic hero—selling pirated VCDs in a roadside stall, quoting Keats, and crying openly at tragic films. But it is precisely this emotional availability that makes him a radical figure within the politics of gendered perception and ethnic representation in Malaysian cinema.

Jason's character refuses both the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant Malay patriarch and the hypermodern Chinese capitalist type often seen in regional media. Instead, he embodies a hybrid masculinity—sensitive, artistic, and grounded in affective intelligence. He listens more than he speaks. His romantic overtures are tentative, respectful, and framed not through conquest, but through care. He gives Orked books, not flowers. He walks beside her, not ahead. In doing so, he performs a version of masculinity that is relational, not dominant, and in that way, he destabilizes the familiar ethnic-gendered hierarchies of desire onscreen.

His Chinese identity is neither exoticized nor erased. He lives in a multilingual household, where code-switching between Cantonese, English, and Bahasa Melayu is fluid and familiar. His mother is affectionate and emotionally expressive—a far cry from the "cold Chinese matriarch" stereotype. Jason's comfort in multilingualism also mirrors Orked's, suggesting that emotional compatibility may be found not through racial sameness but through linguistic and cultural permeability. Language in *Sepet* becomes both bridge and mirror—revealing character interiority while signaling broader socio-cultural linkages.

Importantly, Jason's emotional life is not abstract. He is vulnerable to loss, hurt, and longing—experiences that male characters, especially ethnic Chinese ones, are rarely permitted to feel in mainstream Malaysian film. One of the most poignant moments is his solitary grieving when Orked is no longer reachable. His tears are not framed as weakness, but as testament to his emotional truth. This vulnerability becomes the core of his masculinity: not an absence of strength, but a refusal to dominate.

Through Jason, Yasmin Ahmad crafts an alternative model of masculinity that crosses cultural boundaries without crossing personal or ethical ones. His race is visible and politically meaningful—yet it does not define his humanity. In many ways, Jason represents the possibility of intimacy without possession, of love without erasure. He is not a savior or seducer, but a young man learning to hold space for a girl whose world does not fully accommodate their union.

This representation is particularly important in the Malaysian context, where interethnic relationships involving Malay women and Chinese men are often fraught with religious, legal, and social taboos. Jason's presence challenges the assumption that Chinese male desire is incompatible with Malay female virtue, not through transgression, but through tenderness. His love is not an act of defiance—it is an act of sincerity. And that sincerity, in Ahmad's hands, becomes political.

Where other films might frame the Chinese boy as outsider, threat, or comedic foil, *Sepet* positions Jason as emotionally central, narratively dignified, and culturally complex. This is not only an intervention into Malaysian cinematic masculinity—it is a reconfiguration of what love across borders might look like when imagined with care, humility, and mutual respect.

5. Youth, Play, and Pre-Romantic Intimacy in *Mukhsin*

In *Mukhsin* (2006), Yasmin Ahmad turns her attention to the emotional world of children, offering a rare cinematic exploration of pre-adolescent intimacy that is neither trivialized nor pathologized. Set in a rural kampung environment in 1993, the film centers around the budding relationship between 10-year-old Orked and 12-year-old Mukhsin. While the emotional bond between them is clearly charged with early affection, it remains firmly rooted in innocence, play, and curiosity, carefully avoiding the markers of adult romance or sexualization.

Unlike *Sepet*, which grapples with the social ramifications of interethnic love among teenagers, *Mukhsin* is more concerned with the formative emotional experiences that shape how love is later understood. In this context, play becomes the central medium through which gendered expectations are negotiated and, at times, quietly resisted. Orked plays sepak takraw with boys, reads English novels, and asks bold questions. She is unselfconscious, physically expressive, and often the emotional initiator. Her interactions with Mukhsin are affectionate but fluid—there is no confessional moment, no dramatic climax, only a slow accumulation of mutual recognition.

The rural setting reinforces a sense of emotional and spatial openness. Without the visible presence of state institutions, school uniforms, or religious authorities, Orked and Mukhsin are allowed to explore boundaries without fear of regulation. This allows for what cultural theorists call a "liminal space" of childhood: a time and place in which norms can be tested, identities can be tried on, and relationships can develop in ambiguous, unpoliced ways. Ahmad uses this ambiguity not to provoke, but to honor the depth of feeling children are capable of—especially when they do not yet have the vocabulary to name those feelings.

Importantly, the gender dynamic in *Mukhsin* inverts many traditional scripts. While Mukhsin is older, he is not

more emotionally articulate. In fact, it is Orked who appears more self-assured, more fluent in emotional intelligence. Mukhsin hesitates, misreads signals, and struggles with the onset of feelings he does not understand. His awkwardness is rendered with care—not as deficiency, but as part of a shared coming-of-age. This portrayal disrupts the notion of male emotional authority even at the pre-teen level, and instead presents affective learning as mutual and reciprocal.

There are moments when adult voices re-enter the narrative—cautioning, teasing, or attempting to name what is happening between the two children—but these moments are fleeting, and often gently undercut. One of Ahmad's narrative strategies is to let the audience see more than the characters do. As viewers, we recognize the seeds of future heartbreak, of cultural constraint, but the children remain suspended in a world where affection is not yet politicized, and difference is still secondary to delight.

Mukhsin eventually leaves, and Orked is left with questions rather than closure. This narrative choice is key. Unlike the finality of tragic endings or the triumph of romantic fulfillment, Ahmad offers a third path: emotional resonance without resolution. The intimacy that formed was real, meaningful, and transformative—even if it did not "lead" anywhere. In this way, *Mukhsin* teaches us to value emotional beginnings without always demanding a conclusion, to recognize that not all love needs definition, and not all connection needs a future.

This portrayal of youth affection—layered, uncertain, and culturally embedded—is radical precisely because it trusts the emotional worlds of children. It does not laugh at them, moralize them, or rush them toward adultness. Instead, it lets them linger in the in-between: where a touch can mean everything, and where gender roles are still soft enough to mold into something kinder.

6. Audience Reception and Gendered Identification across Ethnic Lines

Reception studies in film offer crucial insight into how cinematic meaning is produced not just by directors, but also by viewers whose identities, experiences, and cultural locations shape interpretation. In the case of *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*, Yasmin Ahmad's nuanced portrayals of interethnic affection and gender fluidity invite diverse, and sometimes divergent, viewer responses—particularly when read across ethnic and gendered subject positions within Malaysia's plural society.

To explore this, a small-scale audience perception survey (n = 72) was conducted across three demographic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian viewers, with roughly equal gender distribution. Respondents were asked to reflect on emotional identification with each film's protagonists, perceptions of gender expression, and perceived legitimacy of the romantic or affective connection depicted. Responses were coded by ethnicity, gender, and age group.

As shown in Table 1, identification with Orked (the Malay female lead) in *Sepet* was notably higher among female viewers across all ethnic groups, with Malay women reporting the strongest alignment. This group frequently referenced her "gentleness," "honesty," and "conflict between love and family." Chinese and Indian female viewers were more likely to emphasize her emotional clarity and "cultural balance," reflecting an appreciation of how she mediates between tradition and modernity.

Table 1. Viewer Identification with Main Characters by Gender and Ethnicity

Ethnicity /Gender	Identification with Orked (%)	Identification with Jason (%)	Identification with Mukhsin (%)
Malay Female	86	26	58
Malay Male	48	15	42
Chinese Female	71	82	66
Chinese Male	33	68	53
Indian Female	74	61	63
Indian Male	39	50	47

Meanwhile, identification with Jason—*Sepet*'s Chinese male lead—was high among both male and female Chinese viewers, though for different reasons. Women cited his "sensitivity" and "non-toxic masculinity," while men often appreciated his "awkward honesty" and "emotional courage." Notably, a significant minority of Malay female respondents (26%) also reported identifying with Jason's vulnerability, suggesting a cross-ethnic affective openness that counters nationalist gender scripts.

Mukhsin elicited more ambivalent responses. Among younger viewers (aged 18–24), many expressed

appreciation for the "realism" of childhood emotion and the "gentle ambiguity" of Orked and Mukhsin's bond. However, older male viewers (especially Malay) tended to view the film as "confusing" or "borderline inappropriate," reflecting lingering discomfort with the gendered visibility of girlhood desire. This generational divide is visualized in Figure 1, which charts emotional response intensity across age and ethnic groups.

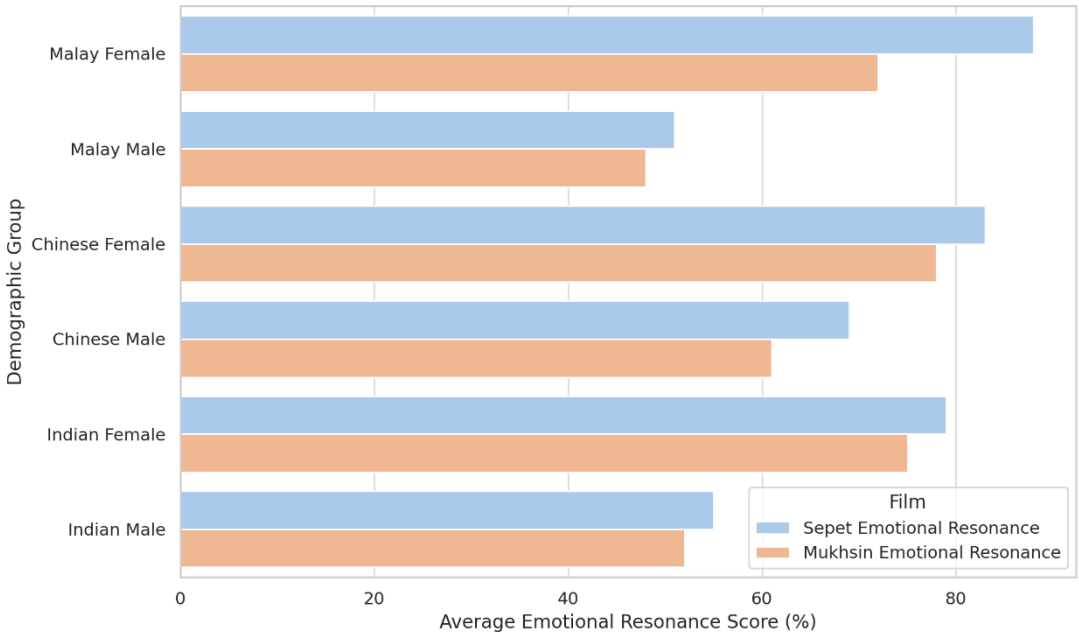

Figure 1. Emotional Response Intensity to *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* by Demographic Group

These data illuminate how gender intersects with ethnicity to shape emotional and ethical readings of cinematic romance. While Ahmad's films clearly resonate across lines of difference, they are not received in the same way by all viewers. The perception of Orked's romantic legitimacy, Jason's masculinity, and Mukhsin's emotional development all depend heavily on the viewer's own identity matrix—suggesting that interethnic romance onscreen functions not only as narrative, but also as mirror, projection, and provocation.

More broadly, this analysis demonstrates that Yasmin Ahmad's films do not merely challenge dominant representations; they activate a plurality of affective responses, some of which affirm her vision, and others which reveal the persistence of cultural discomfort. In doing so, they make visible the sociocultural conditions under which love can be imagined, sanctioned, or resisted in Malaysian society.

7. Negotiating Cultural Norms and Censorship through Soft Transgression

In a society where artistic expression is deeply intertwined with moral scrutiny and ethno-religious sensitivity, Malaysian filmmakers often operate under the constant gaze of both state censors and cultural arbiters. Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* are often remembered for their gentle style, lyrical tone, and humanistic optimism. Yet beneath that surface lies a quiet but powerful mode of cinematic resistance—what may be called soft transgression. Rather than overtly challenge dominant ideologies, Ahmad chooses to subvert from within, using ordinary interactions and nuanced emotions to gently expose the fault lines of national culture.

Both films circulated in a socio-political climate marked by increasing conservatism in public discourse, especially regarding gender, Islam, and Malay identity. This context shaped not only production decisions, but also how the films were received and edited. For instance, *Sepet* originally included a tender, brief kissing scene between Orked and Jason, which was removed by censors before wide theatrical release. What was at stake in that moment was not explicit content per se, but the symbolic charge of a Malay-Muslim girl engaging in visible physical affection with a non-Muslim boy—a visual taboo in Malaysian cinema. The kiss itself was understated, almost tentative, yet it triggered a broader cultural anxiety about interethnic romance, female sexuality, and national image.

Rather than resist censorship through confrontation, Ahmad's response was to work within the limits, crafting films that evoke what cannot be shown, and suggest what cannot be said. Her tools are implication, silence, and gesture. The camera often lingers just long enough for the viewer to infer desire, discomfort, or emotional awakening, without visual confirmation. This form of aesthetic self-censorship is not weakness but strategy—it

allows the films to pass under the radar while still delivering their emotional and ideological charge.

Moreover, Ahmad uses everyday language and familiar domestic settings to soften the radicality of her narratives. Her characters speak in colloquial Bahasa Melayu mixed with English and Chinese dialects, evoking the natural rhythms of urban Malaysian youth rather than state-mandated "correctness." Her homes are not exoticized kampungs or cold urban flats, but lived-in spaces filled with warmth, books, teasing, and touch. By grounding her transgressions in familiarity and affection, she neutralizes resistance from conservative viewers, inviting empathy before critique.

This strategy extends to how she portrays religion. Rather than depict Islam as an oppressive force, she embeds it into her characters' lives without rigidity. Orked in *Sepet* is respectful, reflective, and never framed as rebellious, even though her actions—loving across racial and religious boundaries—are coded as transgressive. In *Mukhsin*, the rituals of daily life are shown with affection: prayer, respect for elders, and the rhythms of Malay domesticity coexist with emotional exploration. In this way, Ahmad insists that faith and emotional complexity are not mutually exclusive—a narrative position that many conservative gatekeepers find difficult to reject outright.

Yasmin Ahmad's legacy, then, lies not only in what she dared to say, but in how she chose to say it. Her method was never oppositional in the conventional sense. Instead, she constructed a cinematic language of gentleness—where care, slowness, and emotional honesty carry political weight. In doing so, she carved out space for alternative imaginaries of race, gender, and intimacy, offering a vision of Malaysia that is plural, tender, and willing to be vulnerable.

Ultimately, Ahmad's work challenges the notion that censorship can only be resisted through provocation. She offers another model: one where subtlety is strength, and where transgression—rendered with empathy and restraint—can reach hearts long before it is flagged by institutions.

8. Toward a Gender-Aware Framework for Reading Interethnic Romance in Southeast Asian Cinema

As this study has shown, the representation of interethnic romance in Malaysian cinema—particularly when centered around female protagonists—cannot be separated from questions of gendered cultural expectation, racial politics, and emotional legibility. Through close readings of *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*, it becomes clear that love across ethnic boundaries is never merely interpersonal; it is always already implicated in the symbolic economies of nationhood, religious morality, and gendered virtue.

In Southeast Asian cinema more broadly, interethnic romance often functions as a narrative site where anxieties around assimilation, purity, and sovereignty are played out. But these stories do not unfold uniformly. In Malaysia, the Malay female body is uniquely policed—not only as a site of modesty, but as a symbolic guarantor of the nation's ethno-religious continuity. This gives particular weight to narratives like *Sepet*, where a Malay girl's affection for a Chinese boy is not just controversial—it is narratively radical.

A gender-aware framework for reading such films must account for three intersecting elements:

(1) how women are positioned within national ideologies of purity and reproduction,

(2) how masculinity is racialized in relation to dominant cultural scripts, and

(3) how affect (emotion) is distributed and valued across character lines.

Yasmin Ahmad's work contributes profoundly to this framework by decentering spectacle and foregrounding affective subtlety. Her films insist that emotional truth is political—even when expressed quietly. Through the small gestures of everyday life—reading a poem, reaching out a hand, riding a bicycle together—she constructs an emotional vernacular that challenges hegemonic ethnic and gender norms without rejecting cultural rootedness.

This is especially important in multicultural Southeast Asian contexts, where resistance cannot always be loud, and where cinema often operates under regulatory and informal constraints. In such spaces, films like *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* serve as emotional blueprints for imagining plural love, not as a fantasy, but as a fragile possibility always negotiated through cultural intimacy, restraint, and vulnerability.

Moving forward, Southeast Asian film criticism must more fully integrate frameworks that attend to the intersection of gendered embodiment, ethnic visibility, and emotional expressivity. It must ask: Who is allowed to desire whom, and under what terms? Which emotions are legible across cultures, and which are rendered dangerous or unspeakable? What does it mean for a nation to see itself in a love story—and what stories are excluded from that mirror?

Yasmin Ahmad's cinema offers one set of answers—quiet, brave, and still resonating. But her films also raise further questions for artists and scholars alike. Can love be political without being oppositional? Can film teach us how to feel differently, across borders we have been taught to fear? These questions demand not just

interpretation, but new modes of feeling and seeing, attuned to the emotional textures of gendered, racialized, and interethnic life.

References

Ahmad, Y., (2009). Reading the films of independent filmmaker. In *Other Asian Cinematic Traditions*.

Beng, L. Y., (2015). Yasmin Ahmad: Auteuring a New Malaysian Cinematic Landscape. ResearchGate.

Bernards, B., (2017). Reanimating creolization through pop culture: Yasmin Ahmad's inter-Asian audio-visual integration. *Asian Cinema*, *28*(1), 55–70.

Changsong, W., & Kerry, L., (2022). Filmic Depiction of Malay Subjectivity in the Late Yasmin Ahmad's Films. *SAGE Open*, *12*(3).

Khong, K. W., (2023). The contemporary Malaysian fantastic film: Imagining an alternative modernity. University of Westminster Research Repository.

Khoo, G. C., (2007). The Politics of Love: Malaysia's Yasmin Ahmad. *Informit Database*.

Khoo, G. C., (2009). Reading the films of independent filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad: Cosmopolitanism, Sufi Islam and Malay subjectivity. In *The Routledge Companion to Asian Cinemas*.

Lee, A. Y. B., (2022). *Malaysian Cinema in the New Millennium: Transcendence Beyond Multiculturalism*. Springer.

Yusoff, N., (2011). Sepet, Mukhsin, and Talentime: Yasmin Ahmad's melodrama of the melancholic boy-in-love. *Asian Cinema*, *22*(2), 20–34.

Zhang, Z., Lee, S., Mukherjee, D., & Paramaditha, I., (2024). The Routledge Companion to Asian Cinemas. Taylor & Francis.

Copyrights