

❖ **Muhammad, Amir - Yasmin Ahmad's Films, Matahari Books, Kuala Lumpur, 2009, (pp 248) ISBN 9789834484507**

Reviewed by Iqbal Barkat

The sudden death in July 2009 of Yasmin Ahmad, one of Malaysia's best known filmmakers, was the direct impetus for Amir Muhammad's *Yasmin Ahmad's Films*. Muhammad, himself a well-known independent filmmaker and journalist, perhaps the *enfant terrible* of Malaysian cinema, has written an insider's journey into the filmmaking of Ahmad with side trips on Malaysian cinema, politics, history, social, ethnic and religious issues. It is both a heartfelt tribute and critical commentary. There is a chapter each on Yasmin Ahmad's six feature films, a chapter on her two shorts and also a chapter on a few of her famous advertisements.

One of the most attractive aspects of the book is its informal, blog-like style. Muhammad's presence in the book is palpable – he's holding forth on the films in one of Kuala Lumpur's many 24-hour *roti canai* cafes over a long *teh tarik*! The interjections and potshots at politicians or the Prime Minister's wife are very much in the spirit of the book.

Right at the beginning of the book Amir Muhammad makes a bold claim: that it is more important for him to write the first book on Yasmin Ahmad rather than the best (14). This statement is less about foolish bravado than an expression of Muhammad's, and by extension the Malaysian independent filmmaking community's, ethos of immediacy. It was Muhammad who coined the famous credo of the Malaysian Indy cinema 'Just do it yourself' – a cheeky turn of phrase that perfectly encapsulates a filmmaking that refuses to abide by the rules, wait for government funding or be sustained by state approval. In an environment where class, ethnic and religious divisions are constitutionally guaranteed and normalised by mainstream media, these independent filmmakers are answering Benjamin's call, offering a cinematic rupture from ossified (state) narratives. It is for this reason that the films of Yasmin Ahmad and other Malaysian independent filmmakers are attracting attention internationally.

As Yasmin Ahmad's friend and a fellow filmmaker, Muhammad is well placed to offer the contexts of the films. These are often illuminating, especially to readers unfamiliar with the nuances of Malaysian society. For example in Yasmin Ahmad's second feature film, *Gubra* (*Anxiety*, 2006), there is a touching scene where the character Bilal Li, the muezzin of the local mosque, on his way to dawn prayer pets a dog lying in the middle of the road. He speaks to the dog gently, asking it to move from the road, away from the dangers of traffic. The dog obeys and as it moves we see that it's limping and only has three legs.

This is not merely an introduction to a kindly character. It has deep religious and political ramifications which generated controversy in Malaysian media. Muhammad explains that dogs

are taboo animals, considered unclean by the majority ethnic group, the Malay Muslims – touching dogs requires ritual cleansing. It is shocking for a Malay Muslim man on his way to prayer, having performed the necessary ablutions, to be touching a dog. Dogs are also animals mostly kept as pets by Chinese Malaysians. Thus by association, the Chinese are also considered unclean. Dogs are thus markers of ethnic division and vilification. The simple act of petting a dog on the way to prayer becomes a scene of how love and kindness transcends Law.

However, the context can also constrain the appreciation of the films. It burdens the reading and can even mislead it. For example, in Yasmin's penultimate film, *Muallaf (The Convert, 2008)*, a story of two sisters hiding from their father, one of the sisters is in the habit of angrily shouting numbers, especially at her teachers in school. These numbers correspond to verses from the Koran, but the verses themselves are not recited in the film. Muhammad provides us with a few translations of the verses in the book making the film take on a specious significance and it ends up proselytizing. Muhammad's conclusion at the end of the chapter is that Yasmin Ahmad is playing the role of a religious teacher in the film. But the attitude to religion in the film is far from assured and in fact, it is possible to read the film as a critique of religion.

I also cannot help but think that a discussion of context around a Yasmin Ahmad film is somewhat 'unYasmin', contrary to the very spirit of the film. One of the charms of a Yasmin Ahmad film is its charming naiveté, a refusal to acknowledge the machinations of the (particular) world. She always stated that Almodovar was her favourite filmmaker and there is something very similar with their worldviews. Almodovar is famously known to have made most of his films as if Franco never existed. For both Almodovar and Ahmad, this attitude is not mere callowness but a (political) strategy. It makes what has been effaced, glaringly present.

In *Gubra (2006)*, after the scene with the dog, Bilal Li meets his two neighbours, Kiah and Temah, sex workers on their way home after the night's work. He is friendly with them and even shares a joke. Bilal Li and his wife are never judgmental of the women but give them support and assistance. According to several conservative articles and blogs discussing the film, as a muezzin and a responsible Muslim, Bilal Li should have reported the women to the religious authority, admonished or advised them to repent their ways or at the very least, given them a look of disgust or regret. But in the world of the film the religious authority does not exist and religious people are remarkably tolerant – making the horror of the (effaced) true reality all the more obvious.

Yasmin's Ahmad's supposed political naiveté is a source of irritation for the more astute Muhammad. He recounts an incident in the book in which he accused Yasmin of being a paid mouthpiece of the establishment over Yasmin's *Boat Race* advertisement made for the national petroleum company, Petronas, to celebrate Malaysia's Independence Day in 1999. Yasmin made a number of these ads to celebrate national events. They are all unashamedly melodramatic and have a strong social message, usually one of filial piety or multiculturalism. *Boat Race* features a boat race between a boat of mono-ethnic Malay rowers, who are all muscular and athletic and a boat of multi-ethnic rowers, all of different shapes and sizes. The Malay boat surges ahead but midway an inter-boat conflict stops its progress. The multi-ethnic boat wins.

According to Muhammad, this ad is conservative as it fans Malay fears of being overtaken by the other ethnic groups in Malaysia. He claims that it exhorts Malays to remain united. The ad was aired the year the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Muhammad, sacked his deputy Anwar Ibrahim. Ibrahim was later imprisoned over trumped up charges of corruption and jailed for six years. This political act was the subject of protest by many Malaysians, including the Malays. Mahathir Muhammad had a difficult time convincing the majority of the Malays to continue

supporting the national ruling party, UMNO.

Perhaps read in the context of the Malaysian political scene, Muhammad is correct. However, eleven years after the event, I find it difficult to concur with his reading. Even though the ad features a voiceover at the end exhorting unity, the mono-ethnic boat lost the race not because of disunity but because of its singular nature. It is made up of men who are all the same. The multi-ethnic boat is a microcosm of the world. The people at the jetty including the cheering crowds, the brass band and even the organisers are all a motley bunch of colours and sizes. The mono-ethnic boat stands out, misplaced in the mise-en-scene, set up to lose right from the very start.

In a Yasmin Ahmad film, diversity is simply the way of the world. Her films negotiate through this diversity not through effacing or celebrating difference but through prioritizing the universal. This is her enduring legacy. Muhammad's book may not offer radical readings of the films but it is important as it provides us with a glimpse into a wonderful filmmaker and human being. It also succeeds in recounting the social environment in which Yasmin Ahmad lived and worked.

About the Author

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