

The Metamorphosis of Malay Women in Popular Malay Television Dramas

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Abstract

Despite the popularity of Malay television dramas, little attention has been given to how these narratives construct and convey the idealised notion of Malay womanhood. This study investigates five popular Malay television dramas and focuses on the metamorphosis of the main female characters within these narratives. The paper explores how gender, religion, and socio-cultural expectations intersect to shape the portrayal of the ideal Malay woman through the lens of Crenshaw's intersectionality theory using a multimodal discourse analytical approach. Findings reveal that there is a recurring pattern across all five of the female characters as each narrative progresses despite their differing contexts. The female characters are portrayed negatively at the beginning of their narratives as they exhibit defiance while their eventual transition towards the end portrays them in a positive light as they are positioned into more subordinate or subservient roles. This highlights how Malay popular culture reflects and reinforces gender expectations that are shaped by the interplay of gender, religion, and culture.

Keywords

Malay women, Malay popular culture, women roles, televisual characters, television dramas

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Introduction

Metamorphosis is often associated with beauty and renewal, as exemplified in nature's transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. Metaphorically, humans may metamorphose from shedding certain character traits to adopting new ones. However, what constitutes the metamorphosis of a woman and who determines whether it is one of empowerment or control? Since metamorphosis in the figurative sense is not a biological process, it suggests that women's transformation would involve social and cultural expectations. Undeniably, both men and women are subject to traditional gender expectations and are constantly socialised to adhere to certain gender role standards throughout their lives. These pressures transcend cultural and religious boundaries, particularly affecting women globally (UN Women 241). In Malay and some other societies with strong religious influences, gendered expectations are often shaped by cultural and religious interpretations that emphasise distinct roles for men and women (Klingorová and Havlíček 2-3).

As a result of religious power structures that influence gender role values in society, Malay women's views on their own roles are multifaceted. Malay women face dual expectations, to uphold traditional notions of femininity (Abdullah et al. 452) while also participating actively in economic and social life (Mohamad 148; Saleh et al. 90). In negotiating these pressures, many have pursued education, joined the workforce, gained media visibility, and assumed leadership roles. Their progress, however, continues to be shaped by patriarchal structures, culturally embedded interpretations of religion, and prevailing social norms that continue to restrict women's roles (Aljunied 156; Ariffin 73; Karim and Samsudin 105). As such, these conflicting expectations of being a traditional yet modern female contribute to an increase in cognitive dissonance among Malay Muslim women (Kok and Gong 6). Premised upon this understanding, this paper argues that media plays an important role in creating this cognitive dissonance due to the influx of confusing media content which portrays Malay women stereotypically (Jayasainan et al. 426). Hence, this paper argues that, most Malay media's notion of the ideal Malay woman is that she is destined to metamorphose into a traditional feminine woman.

In this paper, we analyse five main female characters from five different but popularised television dramas (TVDs) and show how they were portrayed throughout such narratives. Examining five female characters from five popular TVDs over five years reveals recurring patterns of female representation. The selection, based on viewership, offers a manageable yet diverse dataset that reflects audience preferences and recurring gender themes across different storylines. This analysis is done through the lens of Crenshaw's theory on

intersectionality, highlighting how cultural interpretations of religion transform these characters. As this study focuses on Malay womanhood, the theory considers intersecting aspects of gender, religion, and culture in shaping experience. Hence, it offers a nuanced framework to examine how cultural interpretations of Islam interact with patriarchy and gender in character transformation. Unlike theories that rigidly enforce gender binaries or view gender only as a social construct, intersectionality provides a flexible framework that can be applied to socially and culturally nuanced societies, like Muslim contexts, that acknowledge gender differences. We analyse the five female characters using Bednarek's televisual characterisation framework, which considers multimodal resources such as dialogue, camera angles, and kinesics. Unlike approaches that focus only on narrative or language, this framework offers a holistic view of how characters are discursively and visually constructed which is crucial for studying gender in Malay TVDs, where meaning is derived from multimodal resources. As such, examining these metamorphoses reveals popular trends in female characterisation across a five-year span and how women are valued in the Malay community.

Malay women in context

In the lived experiences of Malaysian women, despite a substantial proportion of them being educated and participating in the workforce (Muzafar and Hamid 26), Malay women in particular are still inclined to observe traditional expectations of womanhood which include being compliant with traditional expectations of femininity (Abdullah et al. 451; Hamid et al. 7). Although contributing in the workforce, most Malay women seem by default the primary caregivers of their children and take on most of the responsibility in housework, thus having a less balanced life in comparison to their male counterparts (Abdullah et al. 445; Boo 2354). Karupiah (118) found that among highly educated and urban Muslim and Hindu women in Malaysia, these women held an essentialist view of their gendered roles. They believe that they must be gentle, thoughtful, and self-sacrificial, attributing this to femininity. This shows that Malaysian women continue to face cultural expectations intertwined with overarching expectations to uphold traditional gender roles.

As this study examines female character representation in Malay media, the understanding of gender roles in Islam is necessary as Malaysian Malays are Muslim by definition. In this instance, TVDs are chosen for analysis rather than films due to their high popularity among local viewers (Wahab et al. 168). Besides that, TVDs require prolonged engagement compared to a film's single and isolated viewing experience (Piazza et al. 9). This entails that the ideological

nature of the TVD could be more pervasive to viewers compared to film. Furthermore, according to Jayasainan et al. (426), viewers tend to build parasocial relationships with characters on screen, particularly in the romantic genre where the storyline revolves around familial, romantic relationships and highlights gender roles within these relationships. Moreover, as this genre tends to have a large female audience, the portrayals are reflections of real-life experiences and may shape female viewers' values on gender roles as well. It is therefore crucial to analyse how Malay women are represented in Malay TVDs, paying particular attention to the intersection of gender, religion, and culture, especially cultural interpretations of Islam.

The intersection of Malay women and religion

Crenshaw defines intersectionality as “a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking” (149). Her original notion of intersectionality focused on Black women's lived experiences in the United States who face marginalisation through race, class, gender, and other aspects of identity within the context of employment discrimination and legal cases where the combined effects of gender and race were overlooked (140-150). Since then, intersectionality has expanded to include other aspects like religion in differing contexts. The theory allows for an analysis of how overlapping identities shape experiences of oppression and privilege. As Weber (22) observes, there has been limited use of the theory in examining religion despite the rise in feminist scholarship relating to gender and Islam. She asserts that including faith and religion in an intersectional framework is not intended to examine what the religion is per se but how it is practiced in context.

Globally, the conception of gender roles in Islam has mostly been interpreted in accordance with patriarchal societies. Therefore, there are conflating conceptions of gender roles in relation to Islam with certain Muslim-majority patriarchal cultures which appear to have been adopted into Malay-Muslim religious practices as well (Karim 49; Mohamad 132). This is despite the fact that Islam has always encouraged joint decision-making, shared responsibility in domestic and economic tasks as well as equal education opportunities for both genders (Karim 49; Duderija et al. 104). During premodern Islamic interpretive traditions, as in Victorian Britain, women were viewed as biologically inferior, subjects of male authority, deficient in reason and intellect, as well as temptations to their male counterparts (Duderija et al. 36). Such premodern notions may still be practiced outright, often portrayed in media as ideal, which possibly

contributes to Malay women's confusion of their roles in society, further contributing to cognitive dissonance.

Hence, taking into account the context of Islam in Malay society, gender role conceptions in the Malay context appear ambivalent. Hossain (85) believes that the Malaysian government has played a role in creating this ambiguity as a result of their conflicting signals in regards to the role of women in Malaysian society. An example cited by Hossain (86) was that the Malaysian government encourages the practice of traditional family values as a means to counter moral decline among its citizens. This emphasis, however, places the burden on women by reinforcing the importance of their roles as wives and mothers. At the same time, the state encourages greater female participation in the workforce, particularly in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), while insisting on a familial structure that is in accordance with religious ethos. However, government interventions to ensure equal opportunities, such as affordable childcare and flexible working arrangements for women, remain insufficient and reflect a lack of meaningful support for women's participation in the workforce. Moreover, the government's role in media intervention which includes fair portrayals on screen is also quite limited, often cited as vague (Kaur 83; Wood et al. 104). As such, the media, like local popular cultural products, persist in stereotypical gender portrayals, further shaping society's thoughts and values on gender roles. A study on popular Malay TVDs during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the incongruity of women's roles, showing how they were expected to prioritise domestic duties over professional ones. These TVDs also depicted how contradictory government expectations exacerbated women's stress and limited their public engagement (Syed et al.). Building on this, the present study examines other popular Malay TVDs to see whether they reflect similar gender biases.

Portrayal of women on television and film

Gender can be performed in virtually any social context, reinforcing normative expectations (West and Zimmerman 145). In turn, these performances can be reflected across television and film genres. However, this study contends that the depictions of gender in the romantic genre may exert a stronger influence on viewers as the differences in gendered expectations could be more apparent compared to other genres. This is because there are more relatable storylines that viewers experience in real life. In the West, a number of studies have shown diverse gender representation in films and television programmes. For example, Disney films have a number of films dedicated to the family genre which also intersects with the romantic and musical genres. As suspected, both female and

male characters are portrayed stereotypically (Mason 130; Wiersma 111-117). This is shown to have an effect on children (Coyne et al. 1921) as well as young adults in their perceptions on gender roles (Minor 49).

Conversely, in more contemporary Western TV drama serials, it is argued that there are more diverse representations of women. This is possibly a result of the call for better representations that reflect the shift in contemporary Western societal belief systems. To illustrate, popular television serials like *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2017), *Weeds* (2005-2012), *Saving Grace* (2007-2010), and *Nurse Jackie* (2009-2015) among others have predominantly female casts and female leads. These television serials have shown a variety of female representations which include more masculine-associated traits like the use of profane language (Bednarek 435) and the portrayal of difficult women in the prison genre (Hohenstein and Thalmaan 123). Such representations nevertheless, may be more widely accepted in the West than in Eastern societies like Malaysia. Hence, there may be more rigidity when it comes to portraying women in more masculine ways in the local context. Locally, popular Asian dramas of non-Malaysian origin like those from Indonesia, South Korea as well as the Philippines were found to portray women stereotypically as sweet, docile, and kind (Wahab 6). This entails that female portrayals in the East tend to have more traditional depictions.

The preference for more traditional representations of women in the media can be found in Malay TVDs as well. Local Malay television programmes in general seem to still portray women stereotypically (Azmawati 4; Lee 15). Some Malay films have been critiqued as promoting negative values related to gender which may have detrimental repercussions for women. For example, a highly popular film *Ombak Rindu* (Waves of Longing) portrayed the lead female character as a “good wife” by depicting her as weak, submissive, and emotionally dependent on men (Azmawati 212–213). Its popularity suggests that such portrayals resonate with dominant cultural expectations of femininity and continue to appeal to Malay audiences. In another study, Manan points out that at the peak of Malaysia’s call for modernity which aspired women to have equal opportunities, a TVD entitled *Azlina* (2001) made little effort in challenging traditional presuppositions made about women (Manan 126). Manan showed that there seemed to be an anxiety over women who were untraditional. The men in the TVD were depicted as being responsible to save these women and that an ideal Malay woman was one who upholds traditional female qualities through the legitimation of women themselves. This is unsurprising, as scholars like Martin (413) have argued that part of the Malaysian government’s broader project of

sustaining “new Malayness” involved regulating ideals of femininity, particularly for Malay Muslim women.

In more recent studies however, although there are stereotypical portrayals of Malay women in some TVDs, it seems to have improved from past depictions (Ibrahim et al. 5). However, it was noted that ideal female portrayals of female leads tend to be juxtaposed with evil supporting female characters. This signifies an extreme dichotomy when it comes to Malay women’s images, spreading the notion that women can only either be one or the other.

More Islamic-themed films on the other hand, arguably provide better female representations. Muhammad states that there are more female protagonists being the centre of narratives and depicted as enthusiastic spirits who are intelligent, resilient, emulating good moral values as well as having great mental strength (19). Hence, it could be contended that narratives which are more Islamically-themed may produce better representations of Malay Muslim women in comparison to films and television programmes that do not categorise itself as purely Islamic.

For example, Lee’s analysis of a popular local television sitcom *Senario*, finds that female representation in one of the episodes exemplifies a deep-rooted patriarchal belief system within the Malay community (15). In his analysis, Malay women are constructed in three ways: (1) a non-traditional female identity is considered immodest, (2) any Western influences adopted by a female threatens Malay female identity and considered evil, and (3) upholding traditional notions of femininity is the ideal. Lee’s study reveals that there are patriarchal nuances in the Malay community with regard to gender roles. Therefore, there is a need for more investigations of Malay media to identify how gender power dynamics intersecting with religious misinterpretations continue to be sustained which gives us a window into what Malay society values in relation to their gendered roles.

Method

This study examines the metamorphosis of five main female characters in five Malay TV dramas, namely, *Rindu Awak 200%* (2014), *Dia Isteri Luar Biasa* (2015), *7 Hari Mencintaiku* (2016), *Kekasih Paksa Rela* (2017), and *Jangan Benci Cintaku* (2018). These dramas were selected from TV3, Malaysia’s leading free-to-air television channel, specifically from its prime-time drama segment, *Slot Akasia*, which has consistently attracted the highest viewership ratings. The study adopted a multimodal discourse analytical approach seeing the value in examining both verbal and visual data. Due to the extensive amount of data that was chosen for collection from the TVDs, the data collection procedure was that of a

qualitative content analysis. This is following Feltham-King and MacLeod who proposed to combine both discourse and content analyses when examining “shifts, changes, and the pervasiveness of particular positions” (5). Hence, the units of analysis, which were the gendered expressive cues of the main female characters, were first collected by using a content analysis and then later analysed using a discourse analytic approach, following particularly Bednarek’s multimodal analytical framework on expressivity in televisual characterisation (3 – 21).

Bednarek’s framework provides a method to examine expressive cues at the micro-level and meso-level. Expressive cues in Bednarek’s framework involves the identification of explicit cues in which a character may give explicit information about herself, or explicit information about other characters. Her framework also allows for the identification of implicit cues which involves observing conversational structures, lexis, syntactic structures, paralinguistic features, visual features, and impoliteness strategies used by characters. As such, by examining the clusters of explicit expressive cues and implicit expressive cues at the micro-level, this informed the expressive strategies of the characters analysed for the meso-level analysis. Hence, it is through the clustering of these expressive cues and then later the combination of these strategies that the female characters’ overall expressive identity at each point in a three-act narrative structure were deciphered. These acts are labelled as Act I, Act II, and Act III, representing the beginning, middle, and end of the TVDs respectively. Hence, providing a means to see how the female characters metamorphosed throughout the TVDs.

Findings

The multimodal resources examined for each female character throughout the three acts showed that the main female characters for the first three TVDs shared quite similar character traits. Although the female leads in *Kekasih Paksa Rela* and *Jangan Benci Cintaku* differ from the other female leads, they are still portrayed negatively in Act I, each in a distinct way. In Acts II and III, there are some shared indications of change which are more drastic for the first three female characters while more subtle changes in the latter two female characters due to the contexts of their narratives. Despite the differences, these findings are significant nonetheless. The results in Table 1 show the top character traits of the female characters under study that account for $\geq 50\%$ of their personalities.

Table 1
Top character traits of female characters in five Malay TVDs

Character (TVD)	Act I: Beginning (≥ 50%)	Act II: Middle (≥ 50%)	Act III: End (≥ 50%)
Mel (Rindu Awak 200%)	insolent (25%) shows emotions (15%) troublesome (12%) = 52%	ashamed (16%) accepts advice (14%) affectionate (10%) religious (10%) = 50%	victim (21%) assertive (17%) shows emotions (12.5%) = 50.5%
Dewi (Dia Isteri Luar Biasa)	insolent (14%) troublesome (12%) assertive (11%) fearful (9%) shows emotions (7%) = 53%	affectionate (25%) nurturing (20%) shows emotions (20%) = 65%	affectionate (16%) sympathetic (12%) submissive (12%) grateful (12%) = 52%
Mia (7 Hari Mencintai ku)	insolent (33%) troublesome (15%) shows emotions (13%) = 61%	shows emotions (18%) ashamed (15%) nurturing (14%) religious (9%) = 56%	shows emotions (33%) affectionate (17%) = 50%
Hanan (Kekasih Paksa Rela)	shows emotions (11%) fearful (9%) affectionate (7%) apologetic (7%) victim (6%) = 50%	affectionate (14%) fearful (9%) troublesome (9%) apologetic (6%) kind (6%) showing concern (5%) assertive (5%) = 54%	affectionate (12%) shows emotions (10%) assertive (8%) troublesome (8%) fearful (6%) kind (6%) nurturing (6%) = 56%
Fika (Jangan Benci Cintaku)	troublesome (15%) naïve (13%) assertive (10%) incompetent (7%) spoilt (7%) = 51%	assertive (17%) shows emotions (10%) affectionate (9%) nurturing (9%) patient (8%) = 53%	assertive (28%) shows emotions (24%) = 52%

Act I - The troubled woman needs saving

As shown in Table 1, the five female characters in the TVDs analysed were predominantly introduced in a negative light. From the outset, they are portrayed as troubled and in need of saving, implying that their behaviour requires rectification. In Act I, these characters are depicted as lacking justifiable reasons for their actions, suggesting they are inherently problematic. The first three female characters share traits such as being insolent, troublesome, and emotionally expressive. Although England et al. (559) describe troublesome and emotional behaviour as typical feminine qualities, insolence is not conventionally framed as feminine. Its recurring emergence in the data implies that women who fail to align with expected feminine norms are constructed as insolent by the TVDs. Collectively, these characterisations contribute to an overall negative portrayal of women in the first three TVDs.

In contrast, the fourth and fifth TVDs present Hanan and Fika somewhat differently, yet their characterisations remain troubled. Hanan is emotionally driven and vulnerable, implying her need to be rescued, while Fika’s troublesome and naïve traits highlight her immaturity. All five characters initially resist marriage, appearing unreasonable when juxtaposed to their patient husbands, as conveyed through multimodal resources. A sample scene from Act I of one TVD is shown Figure 1.

Shot	Visual Frame	Translation
11		<p>((<i>Khuzairi walks closer to Mia</i>))</p> <p>Khuzairi: Mia these are some necessities for you.</p>
12		<p>There’s soap, shampoo,</p>

13		<p>toothpaste,</p> <p>Mia: = ALRIGHT! You don't have to mention it all.</p>
14		<p><i>((roughly lifts the plastic of things))</i></p> <p>I can see it all here.</p>
15		<p><i>((no speech, rolls eyes))</i></p>

Note: *((italicised text))*: Annotation of non-verbal activity, such as gestures or facial expressions; (=): The next speaker begins instantly at the end of the current speaker's utterance; (,): Indicates a temporary rise or fall in intonation; ALL CAPS: Indicates shouted or increased volume speech.

Figure 1. Snippet of a scene from *7 Hari Mencintaiku*

In Figure 1, Mia is insolent to her husband who has pure intentions for his newlywed. As he explains what he has bought her, Mia snaps at him, as seen in shot 13. Mia's interruption, annoyed expression, and rough handling of the items in shot 14, demonstrate her insolence. This behaviour recurs throughout Act I and mirrors that of other female characters, particularly Mel and Dewi. Overall, the female characters at the beginning of the TVDs are not portrayed as the soft, subservient, and nurturing women typically expected of Malay females by societal standards. Although this may hint at changing female roles in the local context, the message to audiences is that these are not ideal females. They are depicted as having ill or naïve intentions who had married goodhearted men.

Most of the male characters, meanwhile, remain patient despite their wives' extreme behaviours, which ultimately leads to the women being punished as a consequence of their defiance. Redemption comes only when they conform to traditional gender norms in Acts II and III. This contrasts with the strong-willed females in Bednarek and Hohenstein and Thalmann's studies, where profanity and sexual agency signalled empowerment. Such expressions, however, contradict Islamic principles of modesty. The comparison here is not to endorse Western portrayals but to highlight differing cultural frameworks that represent female strength. The Malay TVDs analysed tend to depict spirited women negatively, suggesting that assertiveness as shown in Act I is frowned upon. Their eventual metamorphosis into softer, tamer figures by the middle and end of the narratives implies that conformity, rather than defiance, defines an ideal woman within these dramas.

Act II - Defiant wives and their inevitable reckoning

In Table 1, while the female characters do not display identical traits with one another in Act II, their characterisations contrast sharply with those in Act I. These metamorphoses mark significant shifts from the beginning to the middle of the narratives, resulting from their earlier insolence and defiance toward their male counterparts. In most of the TVDs analysed, traumatic events trigger the female characters' transformations into emulating more feminine and positively valued traits such as being affectionate, receptive to advice, nurturing, and religious. The exception is Hanan from *Kekasih Paksa Rela*, whose troublesome and assertive traits persist, leading to further conflict in Act III. In *Jangan Benci Cintaku*, Fika shows some positive traits, but assertiveness dominates, reflecting the TVD's context where her husband's infidelity is not meant to be legitimised. Overall, these transformations stem from defiance that invites retribution which forces them to change. A sample scene from Act II is as follows:

Shot	Visual Frame	Translation
1		Mel: ((reading aloud)) "In conclusion, the obligations of a Muslim woman is first, to protect her gaze and chastity.

2		<p>“The second, is to cover her <i>aurah</i>, except in the presence of those who are lawful for her to uncover before.</p>
3		<p>“The third, to speak politely, the fourth, to stay away from anything that attracts men to her.</p>
4		<p>“The fifth, she is forbidden to be alone with a man other than her husband.”</p>

Note: (*italicised text*): Annotation of non-verbal activity, such as gestures or facial expressions; (,): Indicates a temporary rise or fall in intonation.

Figure 2. Snippet of a scene from *Rindu Awak 200%*

In Figure 2, Mel sobs while reading a religious book about the obligations of a Muslim woman. As she lists these obligations, close up shots 3 and 4 emphasise the importance of her words and make her tearful expression more visible. The last three obligations she mentions are traits she failed to uphold, marking her change from being insolent, emotional, and troublesome in Act I to feeling ashamed of herself. This is also seen in Mia from *7 Hari Mencintaiku*, where shame signifies a turning point in her metamorphosis into a more compliant woman. In these TVDs, shame is framed as admirable, reflecting acknowledgement of past misbehaviour, particularly towards one’s husband.

Based on Table 1, the affectionate trait appears suddenly or increases in frequency in four of the TVDs during Act II. Although Mia may not overtly display affection, its presence is implied. The nurturing trait, absent in Act I, emerges prominently in Act II, signaling a drastic shift in Mia’s behaviour. Nurturing is also evident in Dewi and Fika, reinforcing the notion of positive change, as women are traditionally expected to be affectionate and nurturing. Taken together, all female characters undergo metamorphosis as a consequence of their earlier defiance, reflecting disapproval of the traits performed in Act I.

Their retributions highlight the perceived negative outcomes of female defiance, especially in marriages to overly kind male characters. As shown in Figure 2, these portrayals are framed within religious defiance, revealing how religious rhetoric is used to legitimise the taming of perceived female rebellion.

Act III – From defiance to devotion: Malay women’s metamorphosis

As shown in Table 1, the endings of the narratives show similar characterisations among the female characters, especially in their heightened affection and emotional display. However, Mel from *Rindu Awak 200%* and Fika from *Jangan Benci Cintaku* differ slightly due to their respective narrative contexts. Mel’s sense of victimisation stems from another woman’s obsession with her husband, of which he is unaware. Fika, however, refuses to be victimised by her husband’s infidelity, which explains the persistence of her assertiveness. Meanwhile, Dewi, Mia, and Hanan fully embody feminine traits such as affection and emotional expression.

Although Mel and Fika begin with assertive traits, both narratives conclude by restoring patriarchal order. Mel is last shown performing wifely duties, while Fika reconciles with her unfaithful husband. These resolutions nullify earlier defiance, suggesting that female subordination is the only acceptable closure. By depicting the men as accepting their wives only when they become subdued, the dramas reinforce the idea that a Malay woman’s true transformation lies in embracing submissiveness and docility. Figure 3 illustrates this complete metamorphosis of the ideal Malay woman from *Dia Isteri Luar Biasa*.

Shot	Visual Frame	Translation
12		Raden: Promise me, you won't wear those tiger-patterned clothes
13		or zebra-patterned clothes.

14		<p>Don't stomp your feet.</p> <p>Dewi: ((<i>nods her head vigorously</i>))</p>
15		<p>Dewi: ((<i>continues nodding her head vigorously</i>))</p>
16		<p>Raden: Promise me, you won't be mad at me</p>
17		<p>or hit me anymore?</p>
18		<p>Dewi: ((<i>nods her head vigorously</i>))</p>

Note: ((*italicised text*)): Annotation of non-verbal activity, such as gestures or facial expressions (,): Indicates a temporary rise or fall in intonation; (?): Indicates rising pitch or intonation

Figure 3. a snippet of a scene from *Dia Isteri Luar Biasa*

In Figure 3, Dewi is portrayed as fully submissive. Throughout this scene, she complies with her husband's every demand, nodding vigorously in shots 14, 15, and 18. Her prior negative traits are reaffirmed through her husband's dialogue,

as he reminds her of past behaviour. In shots 16 and 17, he says, “Promise me, you won’t be mad at me or hit me anymore?” – implying her former aggressiveness and insolence, which she now seeks to abandon.

Dewi’s defiance in Act I is framed as both a gendered and moral failure. Her aggressiveness is negatively depicted in contrast to her husband’s calm patience, positioning him as a moral authority. This dynamic illustrates how patriarchal structures employ religious rhetoric to legitimise female subjugation, framing it as natural and commonsensical. In Figure 3, her husband also references Dewi’s past behaviour that insinuates religious shortcomings, such as her preference for tiger- and zebra-patterned clothing, framed as immodest. His polite request that she not hit him or stomp her feet subtly recalls her past rebelliousness. Within the Malay-Muslim context, such behaviours are readily recognised as transgressions of expected norms. By delivering these reminders humorously, the scene softens the admonishment and mitigates its threat to Dewi’s negative face, making the correction more acceptable to both her and the audience. This framing not only facilitates Dewi’s compliance but also aligns viewers’ sympathies with her husband, reinforcing the notion that a woman’s true transformation and virtue, are found in submission.

Discussion

The findings of this study align with previous Malaysian research that shows that women are often portrayed as submissive in the media (Wahab 16; Azmawati 212; Manan 126). They also reflect the continuing discourse of Malay womanhood, where women are socialised to embody traditionally feminine traits such as subservience, gentleness, and a nurturing disposition. Hence, this study exemplifies that the Malay woman is preferred and expected to adopt more traditional qualities associated with femininity – to be soft, loving, kind, and yielding. The portrayals and metamorphosis of the lead female characters in these TVDs reveal that the ideal Malay woman differs from the Western woman, who is often depicted with more masculine traits in the studies by Bednarek and Hohenstein and Thalmaan. This is evident because the female characters in this study had initially displayed some masculine traits but were portrayed unfavorably, confirming Lee’s finding that women who perform non-traditional female identities are considered immodest in Malay media (15). Through Crenshaw’s theory on intersectionality, it becomes apparent that these transformations are not only about gender but also about how gender intersects with cultural interpretations of Islam. In the Malay Muslim context, this involves Malay women prioritising their roles as wives and demonstrating obedience to male authority, norms that are often framed as religious obligations. These ideals

significantly shape women's identities and sustain gender hierarchies by framing obedience within the household as a religiously valued quality.

Specifically, these Malay TVDs present a gendered transformation which is deeply rooted in religio-cultural discourse. The female characters' metamorphoses are depicted as necessary to reach social and moral acceptability. This highlights how religious discourse is often interconnected with existing patriarchal values. Their metamorphoses reflect narratives that value obedience and discourage behaviours which are perceived as defiant, which in turn reaffirms an idealised version of Malay womanhood. This strengthens the ideological function of these TVDs in further shaping societal perceptions of gender and morality. It is worth noting however, that in the drama, *Jangan Benci Cintaku*, there seems to be a slight shift in the depiction of the female character, as she adopts a higher percentage of the assertive trait at the end of the TVD. While this could be an indication of possible shifting values of what it means to be a Malay woman, where assertiveness in a female has begun to be appreciated, she also may have been portrayed as such due to the context in which infidelity committed by the male character is universally disapproved and therefore, requires a more assertive female to counter such an act. As such, the overall findings of this study reveal that the ideal Malay woman is portrayed as distancing herself from attributes associated with modernity and embodying traditionally feminine traits.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the metamorphosis of Malay female characters in five popular Malay TVDs, using a qualitative approach through Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, specifically by utilising a multimodal discourse analysis. It has examined how each female protagonist is transformed in their respective narratives. While all the female characters are portrayed negatively in the first act, with higher performances of traits like insolent and troublesome, they begin changing in the second act with more positively associated traits like ashamed, affectionate, and nurturing. This change is depicted as a result of each of them receiving retributions due to their mistreatment of their male counterparts. By the end of their narratives, most of the female characters were depicted as conforming to traditional norms, especially in their heightened emotionality and displays of affection. While the fifth female character analysed adopts assertiveness in the middle and end of her narrative, this is due to her unique storyline where her husband is unfaithful. Hence, the adoption of an assertive trait may have been necessary to condemn infidelity. Although, it could also be an indication of a positive change in the representation of Malay women.

Nevertheless, in the analysis of the five popular Malay TVDs, it is apparent that Malay women are expected to practice traditionally feminine traits.

This study sheds light on the representation of Malay women in Malay media, with a particular focus on TV dramas, an aspect of popular culture which remains underexplored despite its popularity. Understanding how Malay women are depicted in popular culture is crucial, as it reflects how gender is exploited through the cultural interpretation of religion, strengthening patriarchal values. Within the broader society, these texts both mirror and reproduce unequal power relations, making media a key site where dominant ideologies about women and more specifically, Malay Muslim women, are normalised. By employing a multimodal discourse analysis of these TVDs, this study examined how verbal and visual modes work together within the narratives. In addition, analysing the texts through their narrative structure made it possible to observe how the characters are metamorphosed into the idealised female figure at the end of the narratives. To expand on this analysis, future research could include the audience perspective. This can be achieved by conducting a focus group with popular Malay TVD enthusiasts to explore their beliefs about gender roles and to assess whether the portrayals of the main female characters align with their own gender values.

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