

**STUDENTS' AWARENESS ON GENDER ISSUES THROUGH CHICK FLICKS: A
CASE STUDY IN KELANTAN, MALAYSIA**

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Abstract

This article discusses issues involved in teaching gender issues through chick flicks among multimedia students at Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. Nine multimedia students in their fourth year at the university, age 24 years old, in which 7 Malay students (five females) and 2 Malaysian Chinese students (1 female) were examined in their movies appreciation with relation to gender issues. The findings underlined three major problems; first, they seldom learn art criticism or movie critics and it was their first time to appreciate movies; second, 30% of the students were not proficient in English and have difficulties in reading the materials. Third, they have never been explained on gender issues in their courses.

Keywords : movie, student performance, assessment

INTRODUCTION

Today, feminism has gone beyond the original meaning to fight for woman's right and legal reform for education, property right and suffrage. The meaning includes an awareness and analysis of women's discrimination in family, working place, society and all conscious efforts by men and women to end inequality between men and women (Ng, C., Maznah, M, Hui, T.B.,2006). Aziz (2007) further supported that feminist movement rejects any dominance or marginalization of gender be it in politics, economy or social. This movement has actually triggers the need to explore more about gender issues in the society.

Gender study has become an important issue for students in Malaysia, especially in Kelantan area which is known to be strict about religious practice and more reserved in terms of the culture as compared to other states in Malaysia. Entertainment is limited in Kelantan. For example, there is no cinema, thus people have to watch movies through dvd or tv cable. Fashion show that intended to be organized in Kelantan has special condition, in which women models are not allowed to be watched by male audience. Nude models are not allowed to be draw in the drawing class, and most muslim women are covered by veil. Given the situation, it is interesting to explore the awareness of gender issues especially among the university students in this area. More importantly, the students that will be participating in this study are based in Kelantan, thus given the background of this state would probably imperative in further understanding the students' knowledge and take on gender issues.

Nevertheless, Muslim intellectuals have already demanded right for women to have education since 1930. And eventually, women in Malaysia have more equal rights on education such as to study as compared to other Muslim countries (Zainah, 2001). It can be seen in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan which approximately 55% of the university's art students are female. Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), based on entrepreneurship value, was build five years ago and its policy was to add 12 credits entrepreneurship course in Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage; therefore, the curriculum for art students has not included art critics, aesthetics, art history (art theory) and movie appreciation in the film course. As lecturers, the researchers have to integrate the art's theory during art production course. The existing curriculum emphasizing more on art productions and have a little concern on art theory. In order to integrate the theory, the researchers intended to conduct a small scale ethnographic study in one classroom to explore on gender awareness through the use of chick flicks.

One of the most famous old Malaysian cinematographers in 1950's, P. Ramlee, has seldom cast women as protagonist in his movies. Similar to Woody Allen, P. Ramlee plays as main actor in many of his movies. He has four important contexts in his movies; post japanese occupation, malays and the challenges of modernity, understanding of Islam and poverty. In relation to the understanding of Islam, P. Ramlee always includes one of the Islamic law which permits polygamy. The problem is not the Islamic law but the implementation of the law. Justice and fairness have to be applied if a man wishes to practice poligamy (Aljunied,2005). The most interesting fact in Malaysia is that Malaysian can still watch P. Ramlee's movies in television until this day (der Heidem 2002). Many mainstream movies in Malaysia were seldom touching on feminist issues and their genres are mostly horror, comedy, and romantic. Feminist issues are very rare to be shown in Malaysia. Erma Fatima, a Malaysian film producer produces *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir (the last malay women)* where the female protagonist in the film, Mustika is having dilemma of choosing between her fundamentalist fiance, Engku Lek and a westernised malay theater actor, Haikal (Khoo,

2006). This film can be considered as bringing feminist issues into Malaysian film. However, the independent filmmakers produce a quite number of independent films in 2000's, started with Amir Muhammad's digital feature film *lips to lips* (2000), which recognized as Malaysia's first digital film. The genres of film range broadly from concept-driven ideas to pure entertainment, issue-laden ones, story telling, slice-of-life, characterization, semi-documentary styles, experimental, social satire and video essays, and these films emerge as cosmopolitan and sometimes cosmopolitical Malaysia products (Khoo, 2007). This scenario in Malaysia shown that film with feminist issues are not common in Malaysia and the Malaysian might not be aware of this issue.

Materials and Method

In this research, three movies were used; *Monalisa Smile* (Hollywood movie), *Persepolis* (Iranian movie) and *Perempuan Berkalong Sorban* (A woman with sorban necklace-Indonesian movie), as supporting tools to educate gender issues. The *Monalisa Smile* told about the lives of Katherine Watson who is a teacher of art history and work at Wellesley College, a prestigious New England women's school around women 1950's, the screen play casts Julia Roberts as Katherine Watson.

The *Monalisa Smiles* embraces feminism issues, when Katherine Watson brings her idea in teaching modern art which is outside of Wellesley College's curriculum, and her opinion about pursuing carrier for young women instead of becoming "intelligent" housewives. The movie encourage women to pursue carrier and become happy in relationship (Ferriss, S. & Young, M., 2008). In the movie, Katherine Watson encourages her students, especially her three dominant characters, Elizabeth ('Betty') Warren (Kristen Dunst), Joan Brandwyn (Julia Stiles), and Giselle Levy (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Joan Barndwyn is a smart student, and she is accepted in law school, but she prefers to be a housewife. Warren is active in school news paper and she is always against Katherine Watson. Giselle Levy follows feminist concept in the negative connotation by using her body to "control" man (Hamdan, 2005). The *Monalisa Smile's* focuses on post-war ideology of femininity which emphasizing in greater conflict between female ambition and wider socio-cultural structures (Garrett, 2007).

Persepolis is a French animated film based on Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel. The animated-autobiographical film portrayed political, culture, life styles and even art school during revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran. The main character has the same name with the director, Marjane, growing up in a world that is changing so dramatically. She is always rebellious and full of prank that could land her in jail. As the fundamentalist regime tightens its grip, Marjane's parent sent her to Austria as they are afraid of the probability of Marjane to be raped and executed (Schayegh, 2004).

The third movie is *Perempuan Berkalong Sorban* (woman with the Sorban Necklace) which literally means a woman is wearing sorban as her necklace. Actually, sorban is the headdress worn only by male Muslims (Arimbi, 2009). This movie is an adaptation from a novel by Abidah El-Khaliqy (Hellwig, 2011). The story focuses on the life of Anissa who is the daughter of KH Hanan Abdul Malik, a famous kyai, the head of a *Pesantren* putri. Kyai is a religious leader in an Islamic boarding school, so called *pesantren*. Anissa wants to get higher education and always wants to be treated equally with man since she was a child

(Arimbi, 2009; Hellwig, 2011). In this ethnographic study, the researchers intend to examine the gender awareness through chick flicks in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia.

An ethnographic case study approach

Before the research was conducted, the researchers tried to map students' awareness on gender issues by showing the *Monalisa Smile*'s movie to 150 first year art students in 2011. The students' background came from three ethnics; 95% Malay and Muslims, 3% Chinese and 2% Indian, and their ages ranged from 20 to 23 years old. The students were asked a question of 'What is your impression of this movie?' Most of the students answered that *Monalisa Smile* is about a love story between students and teacher, and none of the students' answers mentioned about feminist issues. After evaluating these results, the researchers have chosen fourth year multimedia students who have taken video productions course and had taken some movie courses during their studeis in the university. Nine multimedia students took this course and all students agreed to participate in the research. The researchers conducted interviews and quetionnaires that consists of open and close ended questions. Each student's interview session lasted between 20-30 minutes. Students' backgrounds are; 7 muslim Malay, two Chinese (non muslim) and their ages are 24 years old and most of them chose art stream as their major in high school. The researchers prepared lesson plans for 14 weeks of video production course consisting of making video (10 times) and movies' appreciation (4 times).

The researchers conducted the research concurrently with the teaching of video productions that consist of misé on the scene, style of movies, ideology of movies, plot stories, how to use camera and etc. The course started by showing *Persepolis* and the researchers asked research questions after the students finished watching the movie. The question was, 'what is your impression of this movie?' Most of students answered that the movie is about waror revolution in Iran but most of the answers were only in one or two sentences. The researchers read the answers and instructed the students to form three different groups and discuss the movie in their groups. After their discussion, the best answer was 'the movie showed a history about Marjene since she was a child until adult. She has experienced culture from pre to post war, and western culture which were very different. Since she was a child, Marjene had high imagination and was easily influenced by others. As she grew up, she found many regretful things and she likes to be free'. However, none of the students mentioned about feminist issues in the movie. The researchers continued the course and explained the content of *Persepolis*, and then, the *Monalisa Smile* was shown in week 4. At this time, the students were given the same question given in the previous movie but they were allowed to discuss about the movie and were given reading materials which was *Monalisa Smile* by Hamdani. The best answer from the discussion was, 'the movies criticized mind-set of American in 1950's which support men and discourage women. The American society was more concerned with the dignity of family and ignored the real problems. Women were only emphasized in family relationship'. The students were given *Monalisa Smile* by Hamdan for reading materials and they were assigned a take home assignment for a week. Later, it was identified that the students gave more detailed answers in their take home assignments. The best answer after they read the *Monalisa Smile* by Hamdan, 2001 can be seen as follows; 'What is your impression of this movie?' This film, *Mona Lisa Smile* is mainly about the culture of people in the 1950's in England, where the society expects the young women during that time to be highly educated to be ready for marriage and be a good mother to their children and a wife for the nation's elite males. The education is just a bonus to add so that they will be a "high demand" product in the marriage market. During this time, women are

proud to get married and to start building a family, which is the highest point of success that they can achieve in life. The society in England at this time prioritize their name and pride so much they even do not mind sacrificing their own children in order to keep their names and status clean. When Miss Watson came to that school, realizing this fact made her eager to teach those girls about choices in life that they can be better women of the society. She thought them to be career-oriented and told them that they can make a change provided that they stop following the tradition of the culture. Some girls have bigger dreams but they are all swept away by the social pressure. She was about to fail and give up, but standing on her own principles, she manages to shake the culture and made those girls realized that it is time to prove that women can do more than just raise kids and be house-wives. At last, towards the end of the film, those girls managed to grab their guts for their own independence and for their own decision making in life. They have made a revolution.

Most of the students admitted that their answers were heavily influenced by the reading materials (*Monalisa smile* by Hamdan). Although Hamdan (2001) discussed about feminist issues in the *Monalisa smile*'s movie, but it can be identified that the students did not mention about feminist issues directly or used feminist terminology in their answers. They just mentioned that the American society in 1950s favoured man more than woman. 40% of them admitted that they were having difficulties in using English and it was not easy to read materials in English. Nearly most of the feminist issues in the movie were written in English. And since they did not really understand the terminology used in the reading material, they might have left out the feminist issues discussed in it. This is probably because the Art Faculty in UMK is still using the combination of English and Malay in teaching. Hence, the students' lack of understanding on the terms might be affected by the language switch in the classroom. Further, the majority of students who entered art school in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan are not good in English and nearly 80% failed during English test in UMK before they graduate. Thus, it might explain their limitation in understanding the terminology used in the reading material. In order to improve their English, the researchers gave them another reading materials by Giannetti, (2001), *Understanding Movies*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall. They were asked to summarise one chapter and presented the material by using PowerPoint. It was found that 40% of the students faced difficulties in reading English text and they did not understand the terminology in movie's texts. The researchers helped them by explaining the terminology and feminist issues in the movie of *Monalisa*. In the last meeting in week 14, the students were given an examination to watch *Perempuan Berkalong Sorban* (Indonesian Movie). They have to answer the same questions which is 'What is the impression of *Perempuan Berkalong Sorban*?' They were given 24 hours to answer the questions and they were allowed to read books and all kind of reading sources. Siti (not a real name) gave her best answer; '*Perempuan Berkalong Sorban is a film with a breath of Islam as the movie's storyline. Annisa (played by Revalina S. temat), the main character in the film is Kyai Hanan's daughter who lives in Pasentren Al-Huda in the conservative East Java. Anissa feels uncomfortable living in the environment of pasentren (the Islamic boarding school) and his family as they always differentiate her status as a woman on the ground beliefs of Islam. In their view, the true knowledge are only Al-Quran, the Hadith and Sunnah. Modern books are considered deviant and wrong. In pasentren, girls are taught to be Muslim women. Anissa has the impression that Islam only advocates the men while women are considered weak. Anissa's family and culture in pasentren emphasized that the duties of a woman are to serve her husband and manage the family. Gender is an ideology which is told in this film. The culture of society has socially differentiated the functions, responsibilities and roles based on gender. This film tells the story of a woman who wants to fight for justice. The position of women in*

this film is implicitly shown to be different from men. This has caused many women to lose their rights and freedoms in taking every good decision for themselves and society. It is proven as many women still become victims of physical and sexual violence. The film is related with feminism theory which can be seen through Anissa's struggle to defend her rights as a woman. Anissa's life journey from childhood to adulthood is illustrated clearly in the film and it shows that Anissa lives a life as a woman who firmly persevered to overcome challenges against discrimination against women within pesantren (Islamic boarding school) and Kyai's (religious leader) family.

Two of female students, Siti and Amirah (not real names), had different opinions. They thought that Anissa (the main character in the movie) wants to be given freedom, freedom to choose her partner, freedom in speech, thus they considered that the movie have radical feminism message. The students were able to identify the main issues portrayed in the film such as the oppression of women in many areas, and the fight of the female protagonist to be given the same opportunity as men in almost every aspects of life; however, none of them have discussed feminism issues in particular. After being asked again about their answers, they did not really know the types of feminism. They thought that someone who is opposing Muslim tradition or questioning the practice of Islamic law can be considered as liberal or even radicals. Later during interviews, it was found that most of the students did not have adequate general knowledge about feminism and movies. Most of them did not know terminology of *indie*, types of feminism or feminist movement. Most of them claimed that it was easy to interpret Indonesian movie such as *Perempuan Berkalong Sorban*, but they still prefer to be taught on how to produce movies rather than how to interpret movies. Most of the students did not try to relate religion when they discussed *Perempuan berkalong Sorban* although it is obvious in the movie that the protagonist kept on questioning the interpretation of men on Islamic practice in the Al-Quran and hadith as well as fighting for equality between male and female in terms of social, education, economy and relationship. The Malay Muslim students did not dare to relate the issues in the movie with religion because they admitted that they did not have enough knowledge to discuss Islamic law pertaining to the movie. Most Malay students in this research did not graduate from religion stream high school but they chose art stream during their high school. Hence their understanding on the issues of gender equality in Islam might be limited. Moreover, the interpretation of Al-Quran and hadith with regards to women issues or gender issues are very sensitive as sometimes they are misinterpreted or over generalized that can caused misunderstanding. Thus, it could be one of many possibilities on why the students avoid relating Islamic perspectives to the movie.

Most students admitted that it was their first time to appreciate the movies, and they rarely learn how to critique movies and also other media such as painting, design and photography. UMK's curriculum is still emphasizing on studio production rather than focusing on movie criticism and movie history. Thus, the students are not enthusiastic with art theory, as they prefer to do more in practical. The students rarely have written assignments and written test because nearly all their marks are based on studio assignments. They also admitted that they seldom go to the library. The students expressed that they did not really learn how to integrate social issues in their art assignments. However, they admitted that some movies are easy to be interpreted and they can learn social issues in interesting ways.

In conclusion, the findings revealed that the students have less awareness with regards to gender issues in films. Lack of exposure to the area of gender issues as well as lack of emphasize on understanding gender issues might be the reasons for their lack of awareness.

The university students in Malaysia should be given early exposure on gender issues especially in Malaysian media to help them better understand and appreciate the media or film. Films, chick flicks in particular, can be considered as a strong tool that reflects gender issues in real life. The films should not be viewed only from a single perspective such as for entertainment purpose but should be able to inspire those who watched them.

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