

## Exploring the Depiction of Cosmopolitanism in Yasmin Ahmad's Movie: *Talentine* (2009)

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### Abstract

It is often said that Yasmin Ahmad movies such as *Talentine* depict the elements of cosmopolitanism in its narrative. Nevertheless, limited studies have been conducted to prove such motion. Therefore, this study aims to explore the elements of cosmopolitanism in the movies and how these elements are portrayed in it. The study also focuses on the significances of depicting the elements of cosmopolitanism in cinemas and its role in raising awareness among viewers. A qualitative method was employed as the methodology of the study. The findings indicate that there was a depiction of several cosmopolitanism elements in *Talentine* (2009) namely 14 elements of Culture, 10 elements of Religion, 1 element of Language, 6 elements of Respecting Gender Differences, 2 elements of Respecting Disabilities, and 7 elements of Respecting Minorities. Findings from this study has proven that cosmopolitanism existed in Yasmin Ahmad's *Talentine* from numerous perspectives including politics, norms, or culture.

**Keywords:** Depiction, Yasmin Ahmad, *Talentine*, Cosmopolitanism, Culture.

### Introduction and Problem Statements

A study by Shukri and Abdullah (2018) describes Yasmin Ahmad movies as national movies based on the specialty of iconography and language. In their research, iconography is described as movies with the essence of the national characters, while, according to Salleh and Redzuan (2019), the term "cosmopolitan" originates from the Greek word "kosmopolites" which means "citizens of the world". It refers to a variety of important views in the moral and socio-politic philosophy. Cosmopolitanism is an ideology that believes that all human tribes are one community with similar morals.

A study by Wattimena (2018) suggests that cosmopolitanism is a concept in which humans are equal and should never be segregated by their race. This is supported by Ningtyas (2016) who views cosmopolitanism as an ideology that reflects humanity as a collective community.

In this regard, racial and ethnic differences should never be viewed as a barrier but rather a source of strength.

Besides that, Alunaza and Sarifudin (2017) states that cosmopolitanism can be regarded from numerous perspectives including politics, norms, or culture. Kuala Lumpur is an example of a cosmopolitan city as it welcomes all races from various countries. According to Paramytha (2013), cosmopolitanism as a social value helps to promote mutual respect between one individual to another which subsequently leads to peace. Being in a new place particularly a cosmopolitan city requires a traveller to adapt and mingle with the community and be part of society.

Despite the existence of a number of philosophical elements in Yasmin Ahmad's movies, as discussed by Shi and Baharudin (2015), only limited empirical data are available to advocate the depiction of cosmopolitanism elements in her movies particularly *Talentine* (2009).

This raises the question whether the elements of cosmopolitanism exist in *Talentine*. *Talentine* is a movie about Melur, a mixed Malay girl and an Indian student, Mahesh. Melur, with his melodious voice, sings while playing the piano, is one of the seven finalists of the *Talentine* competition of his school, organized by Cikgu Adibah. Also, Hafiz, captivating with his vocal talent while playing guitar, divides his time between the school and his mother, hospitalized for a brain tumor. This study focuses on the exploration of cosmopolitanism elements in *Talentine* (2009).

### **Reviews of Literature**

#### **Respecting Gender Differences, Respecting Minorities, Respecting Disabilities, and Respecting Religious Differences**

A study by Ningtyas (2016) defines cosmopolitanism as the act of respecting gender differences, respecting minorities, respecting disabilities, and respecting religious differences (themes). The discussion on themes is closely related to the thoughts expressed by authors where experiences, ambitions and ideas are portrayed through the themes. This makes the themes as the main idea or the true meaning of a story. A work of art often conveys an ideological message or critique that is realised by cosmopolitanism for it to reach the viewers. It also has the potential of being a medium of imagination that supports the apprehension of the community.

#### **Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Diversity in the Context of Contemporary Malaysia**

The concept of cosmopolitanism used by Khoo (2009) conveys the reality of life in Malaysia. In her movies, Yasmin Ahmad adapts the strategy of presenting the modern Islamic life that celebrates the value of the cultural differences formed by the blend between foreign cultures with the culture of the local community.

Khoo (2009) highlights that Yasmin is among the new wave of directors who attempt to convey cosmopolitanism as a philosophy that holds the idea of humanity sharing mutual values and universal rights beyond ethnic and national boundaries.

A research conducted by Shi and Baharudin (2015) suggests that the concept of cultural diversity is used as a critique towards the post-colonialism political situation where the citizenship and cultural rights of the minority and majority ethnic groups are yet to receive

equal recognition. For instance, the current government maintains the need for affirmative policies, namely *Dasar Ekonomi Baru* (1971 – 1990) that was replaced by *Dasar Pembangunan Nasional* (1991 – 2000), *Dasar Wawasan Negara* (2001 – 2010), and *Model Baru Ekonomi (MBE)*.

This triggers a debate not only amongst members of the public but also politicians and academicians who often associate this issue with ethnic inequality and social justice. However, from the perspective of culture and religion, the main argument in the framework of multicultural theory focuses on the process of negotiation that emanates on the issues of justice and recognition between dominant cultures that are based on the majority groups and subordinate cultures in the context of a nation.

Furthermore, Ang (2010) believes that the multicultural perspective can be utilized as an appropriate approach to determine how the uniqueness and cultural differences (both religious or world-view perspectives) of all stakeholders in the Malaysian context can be presented as a reference for the western countries that face similar issues.

According to Beck (2011), the concept of cultural diversity should be perceived as a social contract that exists within a national conceptual framework. Nation, in this context, is seen as a political institution that has the potential of maintaining an imbalanced and hierarchical relationship of power. In other words, a culture that is based on multiple ethnicities is ingenuine. A socio-political structure of an institution known as a nation has the mechanism that can be utilized to represent, distribute resources, and defines justice.

### **Depiction of Islamic Interest and Violence**

Shi and Baharudin (2015) report that one of the important elements in the formation of symbolic meaning in religion is the selection of colors and lighting. In this regard, the colours of black and white are featured in the design of clothing especially spiritual clothing. This brings to the conclusion that the text of this movie attempts to present a dominant ideology within the Malaysian society where people of faith are considered as the norm and belong to the dominant group.

Consequently, it provides positive recognition towards different religions by emphasizing a sense of belonging that does not undermine any other religion. However, this was opposed by the conservative thinking of several Malay-Muslim groups who disagree with such equality.

Furthermore, Shi and Baharudin (2015) found that the main motive in Yasmin Ahmad's movie "Muallaf" is to convince the viewers that Islam is a noble and honourable religion not only for Muslims, but also for all. Such a motive exists in the form of narrative arrangement that can be seen in the classroom scene where Rohana was caned by her teacher, Mrs. Siva for disobeying her instruction to draw an elephant. This scene depicts the concept of violence through the character of Mrs. Siva who resorted to violence and cruelty to resolve a conflict in the art class. Rohana was seen acting according to her religious beliefs.

The writers attempted to convey the message that Islam is a religion of peace and that the issue of tyranny and Islam must be understood from the historical context where the image

of Muslims around the globe has been tarnished by the 9/11 incident which involved the terrorist attack by Al-Qaeda towards the United States.

### **Love: Differences, Tolerance, and Respect**

According to Shi and Baharudin (2015), Muallaf also reflects the spirit of cultural diversity and celebrates various religions in the Malaysian context. The view on religious diversity was presented through the dialogues in two scenes. The movie consistently portrays religion as a spiritual necessity for a human that brings them towards positivity and promotes the value of love. Despite the existence of religious differences, recognition and respect can still occur amongst humans in the strive to foster the spirit of brotherhood within the context of a multicultural community.

The characteristics of Rohani and Rohana as well as their father is a distinct comparison that reflects the diverse perspectives of the Muslim community. This potentially reflects the negotiation process between the ruling class with the reaction of those being ruled even though both classes have a similar social background.

### **Method**

This study used a qualitative approach in its process of data collection. The research instrument comprised a textual analysis using a coding book. Talentime (2009) was selected as the sole movie in this study and it was categorised in the coding book to analyse the existence of cosmopolitanism elements in the movie.

Such a method allows the researcher to collect the necessary data that are needed to answer the objective of this study. The coding book were coded by minutes guided by elements of cosmopolitanism as claimed by Alunaza and Sarifudin (2017), Ningtyas (2016), Khoo (2009), Shi and Baharudin (2015) and Beck (2011).

### **Results**

Talentime narrates the story of various aspects of human life and creates its conflict. It focuses on the lives of three friends who participated in an audition for a talent show. Similar to her other movies like Rabun, Sepet, Gubra, Mukhsin, and Muallaf, Talentime is infused with Yasmin's identity of discussing the issues within the Malaysian community, particularly involving the three major races of Malay, Chinese, and Indian.

The cosmopolitanism element of Culture in Talentime is a metaphor for the current political scenario in Malaysia. The cultural background exhibited by Yasmin is still an implicit taboo for most people. Our society shows bad example, for example, students stop and respect to the *Negaraku* (national anthem) but Mahesh doesn't stop when the song plays.

In the cosmopolitanism element of Religion, Yasmin Ahmad attempts to open the public's mind on the issue of changing a convert's name. This was achieved through the scene where Datin Kalsom was shocked when she saw Mei Ling praying. When she was told by Melur's mother that Mei Ling is a Muslim, Datin Kalsom then questioned the use of the name 'Mei Ling' even after converting to Islam. Melur's mother and Mawar answered her question by explaining that Mei Ling embraced Islam and does not (become) a Malay.

Meanwhile, the cosmopolitanism element of Language is an important aspect that highlights the culture of a nation-state community. As language is known to represent the identity of a local community, the Malay language was used in *Talentine* as a representation of the Malay community where the story took place.

Besides, Yasmin Ahmad also made the effort to inform the viewers on the need to observe mutual respect particularly in a multicultural society like Malaysia. This was achieved in *Talentine* by depicting the cosmopolitanism elements of Respecting Disabilities and Respecting Minorities.

In the movie, the element of Respecting Disabilities was portrayed through the character of Mahesh who is a mute. Meanwhile, the element of Respecting Minorities can be seen in the intercultural relationship between Mei Ling and Melur despite Mei Ling's position as the housemaid who nursed Melur since she was a child. In *Respecting Gender Differences*, Ismail is a man created solely to accompany Embun at the end of her time, but only comes at certain times (if Embun is in decent clothes).

Table 1.0

*Cosmopolitanism Elements In Yasmin Ahmad's Movie: Talentine (2009)*

No	Minutes	Elements of Cosmopolitanism	Description
1	00.01.27	Culture	Hafiz is shown to be throwing dice to guess possible answers reflected his indifference in answering the exam and this made Kahoe feel offended because he and other friends acted in earnest.
2	00.03.14	Culture	Cikgu Anuar is willing to cheat and try to bribe Cikgu Tan to help him to win the heart of Cikgu Adibah.
3	00.05.11	Culture	This scene illustrates the attitude of the tardiness of Cikgu Anuar when he had a meeting that made Cikgu Adibah angry but she is just teasing and Cikgu Anuar smiled at her teasing.
4	00.06.19	Respecting Gender Differences	Cikgu Adibah's refusal to reciprocate Cikgu Anuar's love may be influenced by his unpleasant attitude.
5	00.13.53	Culture	Yasmin Ahmad wanted to convey the patriotic nature in her movie by depicting students standing still while listening to the national anthem but showing that only Mahesh didn't stop when the anthem was played.
6	00.23.05	Culture	In this scene, Cikgu Adibah appreciated the song that is sung by Melur. The song might have something to do with her

			own love story or her personal life. Cikgu Adibah is a smart woman. She spoke meaningfully, her eyes very sharp, especially by looking at how she glanced at the judge's scoring paper. Despite her rough way of speaking, she was just talking to Melur just like a mom would to her child.
7	00.25.28	Culture	Melur was seen riding on her father's back. In this scene, it shows warmth and familiarity Melur had with her father, a relationship that is considered awkward in Malay culture.
8	00.28.18	Respecting Gender Differences, Respecting Disabilities	Ismail is a man created solely to accompany Embun at the end of her time, but only comes at certain times (if Embun is in decent clothes)
9	00.31.55	Culture, Religion	During the scene at the dining table, the poem read by Melur is very clear in describing the meaning of death, life, and birth. What's more, her voice was accompanied by the scene of Ganesh's burial ceremony. Melur's grandmother, who was eating using a spoon and a fork, suddenly felt as if the poem was aimed at her because she was the oldest in that household.
10	00.32.55	Culture, Religion, Language	This scene points out the differences between Mahesh's family and the Melur's family as Mahesh is amazed by the close relationship that Melur's family had with each other.
11	00.42.18	Respecting Minorities	It was interesting to see how Hafiz was like in his daily life. He is always with his guitar, always spending his time alone under the tree, usually by himself in between prayers in the mosque and by himself while waiting for his turn to practice. Kahoe, on the other hand, is striving to be a great student, struggling to succeed in life. Between Kahoe and Hafiz, they both have their disadvantages and advantages, but it exists on different surfaces and shapes.
12	00.44.26	Culture, Religion	Embun gives a piece of advice to Hafiz. Her way in wording her advice, particularly when she described two

			things that kept her alive, is in line with her belief in him and her love for Hafiz, is insinuated when the camera shows a copy of the Qur'an and a framed picture by her bedside.
13	00.47.59	Respecting Minorities	Yasmin is also trying to consolidate the stereotypical views of the Chinese people on the Malays. That Malays in general, whether they are successful or not, always receive adequate assistance from the government. The economic privileges granted to the Malays are still considered to be a thorn in the flesh to the Chinese which is unfair and a biased assumption. Kahoe's prejudice against Hafiz was personal because of his father's constant anger towards him, which in turn making him behave provocatively towards Hafiz. In truth, Hafiz is a truthful and self-reliant character on the right track even though through Kahoe's glasses his achievements were all due to his Malay privilege.
14	00.48.57	Respecting Minorities	Cikgu Tan and Cikgu Anuar had a very close relationship, making the audience wonder what the meaning behind their intimacy and shared jokes. This scene cannot be interpreted simply as one action could have many underlying meanings. Perhaps Yasmin Ahmad wants to convey that despite their different race, people can still genuinely enjoy each other's company even if this is something rarely seen in today's society.
15	00.55.19	Culture	Doctor Baya was so harsh and cruel in treating Embun, Hafiz's mother. A doctor should not have this kind of attitude because the patient needs the doctor's full support and understanding to remain strong in the face of their sickness.
16	01.14.17	Culture, Religion, Respecting Gender Differences	There is a scene that described the actions of Mei Ling and Melur's grandmother (both Muslims) against Melur who is suspected to be

			committing adultery, an act forbidden in Islam. In this scene, Mei Ling is shown to be surprised upon seeing Melur going out with Mahesh so early in the morning after announcing that her singing practice began at noon. Mei Ling then shares her doubts about Melur 's purpose and her relationship to Mahesh with Melur's grandmother. Mei Ling allegedly saying that Mahesh and Melur went to a hotel and committed adultery. However, Mei Ling and Granny are shown to have taken no action to confirm their suspicion.
17	01.19.08	Religion, Respecting Minorities	In this scene, Datin Kalsom looked cynical and disgusted with Mei Ling because it was Mei Ling who provided her with food and Datin Kalsom asked about whether the food is <i>halal</i> . However, when it's prayer time, the Datin Kalsom forgot to bring a <i>telekung</i> .
18	01.24.32	Religion, Respecting Minorities	This scene shows Datin Kalsom who was shocked to have found Mei Ling praying. Melur 's mother later explained that Mei Ling is a Muslim. This fact surprised the Datin. Datin Kalsom further questioned Mei Ling's using her Chinese name even after she had converted to Islam. Melur's mother and Mawar explain that even though Mei Ling converted to Islam, she did not become a Malay. Yasmin attempts to correct the Malays mindset about Islam. Mei Ling's character as a Muslim is hoped to educate the public that being a Muslim does not necessarily make one a Malay. Melur 's mother and Mawar further clarified, that 'Mei Ling' has a good meaning which is 'beautiful flower'. Mei Ling retained her Chinese name to show her being faithful to her roots and it is her right to do so. Her continuing to cook and eat Chinese food like Dim Sum and eat using chopsticks, is also her right to preserve her own culture but her religious intentions remain intact and unified with her belief as a Muslim.



19	01.26.20	Respecting Minorities	Each character has their influence on other characters, and this is shown in a neat and organized manner. Melur is shown to be pressing the piano key elegantly which is due to Mei Ling's teachings when Melur was a child since they had lived together for a long time. This scene also portrays Mei Ling making use of the piano to cure the loneliness in her heart.
20	01.28.36	Religion, Respecting Gender Differences	Mei Ling prevents Melur and Mahesh from being together for fear that they are intending to do something bad at Melur's family home. The sinful act that Mei Ling is insinuating is an act of adultery, as seen in the scene of a conversation between Mei Ling and Melur's grandmother.
21	01.30.48	Culture, Respecting Gender Differences	In this scene, Melur's mother is seen to come home from Cameron with Mawar and Jasmine at night. Meanwhile, Harith (Melur's father) and her grandmother have not returned home in search of Bigfoot. When she saw Melur and Mahesh sleeping together in the living room, Melur's mother simply described their situation as sweet. Mei Ling is told to stay at home with Melur and Mahesh.
22	01.33.19	Culture, Religion, Respecting Gender Differences	Mahesh's mother said the children were similar to a light bulb. Despite her principle, she punishes and destroys the hope of Mahesh's love without considering his feelings. She says she loves Ganesh, but she doesn't leave Ganesh alone in pursuit of her love. It's like a loop, Mahesh's mother was allowed to rectify the situation after the death of Ganesh, but unfortunately, the same mistake was repeated.
23	01.36.51	Religion	In this scene, Ismail gives strawberries to Embun. After that, Hafiz who was visiting her found that his mother had passed away. This makes the audience wonder. Was Ismail an angel of death who takes Embun's life?
24	01.41.04	Culture, Religion	This scene shows Mahesh's mother sitting on a table with three chairs. He

			sat in the middle, but to her left and right there was only "emptiness". This portrays a mother, accepting the consequences of her principles. Mahesh's mother was drowning in sadness in her days after the death of Ganesh. This is a reflection of how lonely that particular moment was, even though there were many people around her.
25	01.44.51	Respecting Disabilities	It's hard to understand what Mahesh is saying during the scene at the stairs. Mahesh is a charming boy who cannot speak but he still has a heart and feelings. So in this scene, the director wants to portray the attitude of people who don't care about those with disabilities.
26	01.49.21	Respecting Minorities	Towards the end of the movie, Hafiz sings a song on the Talentime stage, Kahoe suddenly joined Hafiz in his performance by playing his musical instrument. This implies that the community is in great need of one another especially in Malaysia.

Table 1.0 shows the existence of cosmopolitanism elements in Talentime (2009). The findings show that Yasmin Ahmad has successfully incorporated the elements of cosmopolitanism in Talentime. Results from the analysis found the depiction of several cosmopolitanism elements in the movie namely 14 elements of Culture, 10 elements of Religion, 1 element of Language, 6 elements of Respecting Gender Differences, 2 elements of Respecting Disabilities, and 7 elements of Respecting Minorities.

### Findings Framework

Existing literature has classified various elements of cosmopolitanism. The analysis conducted by this study has found several elements of cosmopolitanism in the movie. This includes 14 elements of Culture, 10 elements of Religion, 6 elements of Respecting Gender Differences, 2 elements of Respecting Disabilities, and 7 elements of Respecting Minorities.

This study found that the elements of Language also derived in Talentime (2009). It suits the study by Shukri and Abdullah (2018) who describes Yasmin Ahmad movies as national movies based on the speciality of iconography and language. Following the analysis, this study has contextually found that the cosmopolitanism element of culture in Talentime reflects the poor attitude of some members of the community. This was evident in the scene where Mahesh disrespected the national anthem *Negaraku*.

The movie also focuses on the elements of religion and language with the hope of changing its taboo status among the community, particularly on the issues of the national language and the name changing for converts.

The element of respecting gender differences is also depicted in the movie where it preaches society to respect the decision made by an individual regardless of their gender. Talentime also depicts the element of respecting disabilities through the character of Mahesh who is mute. Researchers believe that Yasmin Ahmad included such element in her work to highlight the disabled and their equal rights to be part of the community.

Other element in Talentime is respecting the minorities. This was portrayed through Kahoe's disapproval towards the delinquency shown by Hafiz in his study. It was further amplified when Kahoe made a sarcastic comment about the privileges that Hafiz might receive from the government despite his academic negligence as compared to the amount of effort that Kahoe had to invest to make his life comfortable.

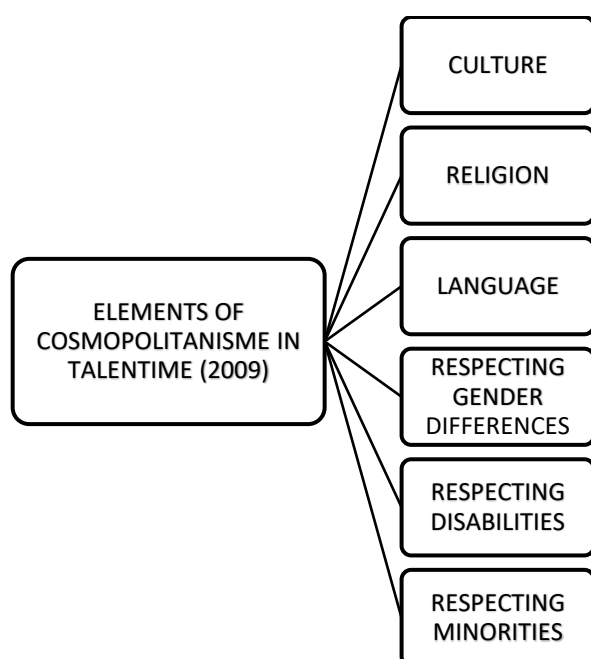


Figure 1.0 The Depiction of Cosmopolitanism in Yasmin Ahmad's Movie: Talentime (2009)

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study advocates for the inclusion of cosmopolitanism elements in local movies as it will instil and strengthen the Malaysian identity in its theme and narrative. The elements of cosmopolitanism will also uphold the viewers' awareness and knowledge about the culture, religion, language, and the element of respect that are depicted by the movie.

Following this study, further research can be conducted to investigate the existence of other elements in the local movie industry. This shall add to the development of knowledge in line with the current era of globalization. The findings of this study should inspire public dialogue – among local movie-makers, international movie critics, broad journalists, interested citizens and viewers – in a transnational public sphere.

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