

Post-Modernism Malay Theater Performance as the Medium of Political Commentary About Political Events Surrounding Contemporary Malay Community in Malaysia

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Abstract

This recent decade shows a very clear tendency among the national theater artists to display political events in the arts archive of post-modernism Malay theater. In line with the development and change of the political climate taking place in Malaysia today, this paper work questions the post-modernism Malay theater arts that is also playing the role as the medium, tool and the subject of 'power and dominance' of theater artists by encode the political ideology and propaganda in the performance. Thus, a qualitative study is carried out to identify the ideology and aesthetics form that have been encode in the performance sign system of post-modernist Malay theater today. The focus of this study rests on the themes of political commentary and the form of aesthetics produced in a post modern malay theater performance. The study methodology employs the qualitative approach by pertaining the post-semiotic theory and the *whitmore* theater signal system model as the theoretical framework of the study. The significance of this study verifies the study hypothesis that there is the existence of the local *counter culture* movement that manifests various political issues and turmoil in the post-modernist Malay theater performance. The results of the study are able to synthesise the *political commentary* of the political events surrounding the Malay society in Malaysia created by the theater director and his creative team on the Malay post modern theater performances.

Keywords: Political Commentary, Post-Modernist Malay Theater, Theater Sign System, Post-semiotic.

Introduction

Through the medium of postmodern theater, the art products also depend on the dynamics of the society and the association with 'power'. This recent decade shows a very clear tendency among the national theater artists to display political events in the arts archive of post-modernism Malay theater. In line with the development and change of the political climate taking place in Malaysia today, Malay postmodern theater plays the role of becoming the tool and subject of 'power' (Mana Sikana, 1995). Thus, this study questions the fact that the local post modern theater artists not only compose works of art based on the beauty of the artistry, but also they function in documenting the conflicts of events that take into account the states of the politics, economy, culture and social of the community on certain conditions. Through the vision, ideology, thinking and emotion created by the local theater artists, the study expects that there will be discourses that will translate a new symbol and meaning about a political flaw into the theater performance according to certain contexts and conditions. Thus, a study needs to be done to identify the ideology and aesthetics form channelled in the current post-modernist Malay theater performance's sign system.

Study Problem

Theater performances shows a very clear potential in exposing the issue and political commentary to the audience. This is because theater and politics are two fields that are inextricably linked to deliver and expand the propaganda or agenda setting for certain parties (Jeffrey, 2008). Related to this, this study contends that theater arts not only plays the role as the medium of ritual, education and entertainment alone, but it is also a medium of propaganda that forms common views about political scenarios. In the political and post-modernist Malay theater production contexts, this study debates on the emergence of the director and his creative energy as also playing the role in producing their own ideology, vision, philosophy and thought with regard to the '*political commentary*' in the form of symbol play. In the arts *archive* that stresses on post-modern aesthetic vision, there are several issues that discuss the political drawback that happens in the social space inspired by the director with his creative energy in the form of new signs and symbols. Through the vision, ideology, thought and emotions of the local artists, this study asserts that there is a new arts discourse that translates a symbol and meaning about issues of political drawback into the theater performance space according to certain contexts and conditions.

In the context of the post-modernist Malay theater and the political field, it is not only playing the role as carrying the protests that are delivered through the symbol of *hybridization*, but also as the agent of criticisms for the political drawback raised in the theater performance *mise-en-scene*. Based on the events that have happened in the contemporary Malay society, to certain conditions and contexts, the study asserts that the local artists especially the theater director also voiced out his protest towards the political events in the performance. In this matter, the study names Namron and the director Harith Amirul with his creative energy as artists who have the desire or 'id' in producing the reaction by considering the socio-political issues, so that they can be discussed or re-discoursed before the contemporary audience. It is in the theater performance space that the socio-political issues re-done by both theater directors are deconstructed and reconstructed into a new arts discourse. In this vein, the study outcome can be made the material to look into the ideology

and aesthetic form produced by directors Namron and Harith Amirrul in making the discourse of the political events on the Malay theatrical performance's textual space.

Study Objective

Harmonious with the involvement of Namron and Harith Amirrul when it comes to displaying the political events in the post-modernist Malay theater arts' archive, the aim of this research is to identify the theme of political commentary and the aesthetic form produced on the Malay post modern theater performance text. The content analysis of this performance can give a theoretical support about the theme and the aesthetic form '*political theater*' that arises from the director's political ideology in the contemporary post-modernist Malay performance texts. In relation to this, the objective of the study is to (1) Justify the themes of the political commentary visualized by the directors of the post-modernist Malay theater studied. (2) Conclude the aesthetic form of the '*political theater*' that emerges on the texts of the experimental Malay theater performance that we have today. Other than that, the selection of Director Namron and Director Harith Ammirul is based on the group of directors of post-modernist Malay theater who self-produce the *political commentary* as the political events in the performance. This study tries to steer clear from sampling other dramatists' story materials. This is following the fact that other story materials will be attached to certain meanings, lending to the possibility of re-deconstruction by the theater director to the point that it will create other new meanings. The reason behind the selection as the sample of the study is based on representing the Malay young theater directors today who are productive enough in producing the political commentary about the issue of 'power' and the relationship with 'political flaw' on the texts of the post-modernist Malay theater performance according to certain contexts and conditions.

Study Methodology

The study methodology employs the qualitative approach. To measure, examine, interpret and produce the study findings, it has applied the post-semiotic approach as the theoretical framework. The post-semiotic theory is capable of detecting the content of the *hybridization* signs and meanings of the political events' symbols in the texts of the post-modernist Malay theater performance. According to Whitmore (1997), the principle is characterized by the *transformability sign* or the symbol and meaning transformation capability that exists on the theater sign system based on the determination of the context. By applying the post-semiotic theory, it can serve as an idea scheme or system held as an explanation about a fact concerning the symbol, signs or marks related to the themes of the political commentary and the aesthetic form emerging in the archive of the texts of the post-modernist Malay theater studied.

Study Design

The study focuses on the themes of *political commentary* chanelled by the director Namron and Harith Amirrul on the performance narrative texts. The next study looks closely into the aesthetic form produced on a directing style in translating the *political commentary* into the *archive* of the performance. Through this, this analysis is able to detect the form of the *political commentary* manifested by Namron, and Harith Ammirul together with their creative team in the contemporary post-modernist Malay theater performance text. To analyse and interpret the *political commentary* and the aesthetic form of the theatrical performance texts of 'Lembu' and 'Mesin & Kopi', this study applies the Whitmore's Theater Sign System model

(1997) that is able to check, measure and interpret the signs on the sign system-based post-modernist theater paradigm. Through the Model (1997), this study gets to analyse and interpret the symbols of the *political commentary* on the texts of the drama performances of 'Lembu' and 'Mesin dan Kopi' that can be found on the theater's visual sign system comprising of the performer system and the performance mise-en-scene system.

Study Procedure

This study adopts the Data Analysis Component Interactive Model by Miles & Huberman (1994) suggesting on several procedures or study steps that need to be executed in synthesizing the *political commentary* ideas and aesthetics form of the post-modernist Malay drama performance studied. The duration of this study takes a year with the execution of the steps as follows:

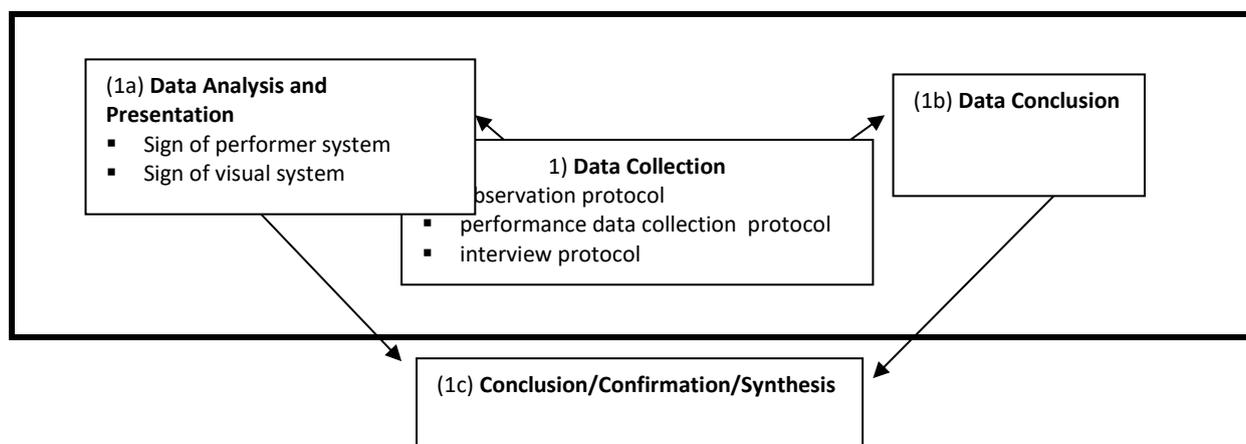


Diagram 1: Modification from Miles & Huberman Data Analysis Component Interactive Model, 1994

(1) Data Collection

This study procedure encompasses the following steps:-

(1.1) *Identify the performance of the post-modernist Malay theater that leads to the themes of the political commentary in the contemporary performance space.*

Researchers detect the Malay theater performance stage events with the post-modernism orientation on stage in performance venues around Malaysia during the duration of the study. After knowing the titles and synopsis of the Malay theater post-modernist performance leading to the political commentary themes, researchers then came to see the performance.

(1.2) *Executing the Protocol of the Observation*

Researchers witnessed the drama performances of "Lembu " and "Mesin dan Kopi" to interpret the symbols, signs and meanings of the political commentary contained in the performance narrative texts and performance aesthetics strategy.

(1.3) *Executing the Performance Data Collection Protocol.*

Researchers captured the drama performances of “Lembu “ and “Mesin dan Kopi” to examine and integrate the symbols, signs and meaning of the political commentary contained in the performance narrative texts and performance aesthetics strategy.

(1.4) *Executing the Interview Protocol*

Researchers recorded the interview together with the study informants comprising of the directors, actors and other artistic crew. The study will adopt the concept of the non-structured interview, whereby the questions posed concentrate more on the whole idea thought to be important or which grabs the interest of the researchers to unravel the political commentary contexts in the arts archive of the post-modernist Malay theater performance being analysed.

(2) Editing and Concluding the Study Data.

The procedure of this study covers the following steps:-

(2.1) *The Interpretation of the Political Commentary Symbol as The Theatrical Sign on The Performer’s System.*

The performer’s sign system refers to the actor instrument involving the actor’s body and voice. Through the instrument of the actor’s voice, this study is able to analyse and interpret the symbols, signs and meanings of the political *commentary* contained on the dialogue speech of the actor that appears in the performance simulation. From the analyses of the dialogues spoken by the actors, this study will be able to synthesise the issues concerning the political drawback implied as a discourse in the archive of the post-modernist Malay theater arts performance studied.

For the instrument of the body, this study can analyse and interpret the political symbol, sign and events constructed by the director with his agent, i.e the actors covering the signs on the personality, facial expressions, gestures and others that explain actions and dilemma or conflicts faced by the character. The analyses on the dialogue, personality, gesture, movement, reaction action and acting dramatic play shown by the actor, show that the study outcome is able to synthesise a new discourse that is intended by Namron and Harith Ammirul with regard to the political issues and events to the audience.

(2.2) *The Interpretation of the Political Commentary Theater Symbol On The Mise-En-Scene Theater Sign System*

The Mise-en-scene sign system encompasses the set background, the stage set, lighting, costume, decoration, props, stage effect, or other artistic requirements that can shed light on the political events sparked in the performance dramatization. From the analysis on the mise-en-scene element, the study is able to synthesise how the director Namron and director Harith Ammirul manipulate the sign system on the stage set, lighting, costume, decoration, props, stage effect, or other artistic requirements that make present the new symbol, sign and meaning as the practical reaction to the political issue. The analysis outcome of the study

is also able to deconstruct the new meaning to the symbol, signage and meaning of the political commentary serving as the propaganda that is spread by the theatrical director on the Malaysian Malay theatrical performance text studied.

Literature Review

3.1 Theater as a *Political Media*.

In general, the theater or the original word '*theatron*' means a place for performance or performance stage that displays acts or acting or 'to act' in a ritual or religious ritual or performance. The birth of the theater has a very close association with the structure of communal life that has a function following certain contexts and conditions. From the function as the medium of the ritual communication with the metaphysical powers to help with the stability of the environmental ecosystem, the medium of theater continues to expand by diverting to the function of education, entertainment performance, to the role as the agent that develops the ideology and *political commentary* to the mass. Upon the surge of globalization and the influence of capitalism, the western theater has spread from being *high art* to *popular arts* or entertainment (Ahmad Izzudin Ramli, 2017). Through this, capitalists or the theater industry traders have created 'high arts' theater from elite performance venues to more ordinary venues on the stage that brings together new agenda, ideology, vision or ideas. From this, the theater performance does not take place in the 'palace or elite' spaces alone, but it is also carried to the 'public, people of the proletariat spaces' alone backed by the agenda and the purpose of the event. The significance is that, the breaking of the wall that separates *high arts* dan *popular arts* in the context of the theater performance, it also creates *agenda setting* or stakeholders by producing a '*discourse*' that has political sentiment. With that, theater continues to expand its function not only in the sense that it presents dramatic acts that stress on ritual, entertainment, educational value motifs alone, but it is used by some artists as the media that can highlight political ideology and their propaganda idea in the theatrical performance texts. In the stage space, theater functions as *commentary politics* by generating various criticisms, in questioning, raising and discussing these power issues between one dominant party and other subordinate parties. Through this stage space, theater is given room to channel the communication democratically to voice and comment on the inequality and unfairness of the power that not only refers to the power dominance by the authority to the mass, but also involving the issues of gender discrimination, race, occupation, institutions, political drawback and globalized power.

3.2 *Political Commentary in the Post-Modernist Malay Theater Medium.*

The Modern Malay Theatrical Performance Arts has brought a new form when it leaves behind the traditional philosophy by creating a theater in the form of play and the realism convention that started back in the 1930s to the late 1960s. Beginning in the 1970s, the evolution of the modern theatrical form continues to develop dynamically through the attempts made by artists who experimented in introducing the new form characterized by the post-modernism that is more extreme and violates the flow of traditional realism. The use of various directing techniques and the editing of the stage drama experimental texts in a new form is the effort in prioritizing the mimetic style, in exposing something very obviously and realistically. The post-modernism approach in Malay theater performance has stressed on the subject of existentialism through abstract dramas or dream plays of absurdism, surrealism and symbolism. However, this study debates that in displaying a form of post-modernism performance, conflicts of drama acts raised do not always have their own agenda

where they show the world of arts events with agenda of existentialism through signs of riot, vacancy, nihilism that separate the roots of the religion, hope and history. According to Schmidt (2005) he asserted that the concept of post-modernist theater does not stress on the stage in the condition of absurdism or surrealism that is full of psychological chaos in the world images of destruction, dryness and loss of hope. The post-modernist world concentrates more on the issue of "belief" about the truth and meaning depends on the condition, relatively speaking. This shows that the meaning of 'truth' about a subject and thing differs and depends on the understanding and interpretation of individuals in varying conditions. In the context of post-modernist theater performance, these symbols and signs can be observed through a director's understanding and interpretation in manifesting the form and the content of the arts events based on the different perspectives and which go out of the norm. Through the performance narrative as seen from the director's eyes, it has talked about the flaws of the society according to his own perspective, ideology, philosophy and thinking. According to Ghazali Ismail (2013), Malay dramatists have social responsibilities by way of unraveling the issue about human life from the social, political and economic dimensions. Should there be anything that is thought to be flawed or there is social inequality, artists will raise the views or comments in their performance in the hope that they will become an example (if they are good) or guidance (if they are negative). This sense of responsibility emerges because artists are humans who are responsible in giving their reactions towards the sociopolitical phenomenon and giving their thoughts individually or collectively about a certain event. With that, the power of the language (by field) becomes the center for all discourse activities, criticisms and social communication tools that every artist can benefit from.

In the context of the theatrical performance that carries the themes of political events, it is the effect of the influence of the cultural movement called the *counter culture* that takes place in Europe and America. On the influence of globalisation, the *counter culture* movement also permeates into several other countries including Indonesia, China, the Phillipines and Malaysia. (Hanafi Hussain,2006). The influence of *Counter Culture* has affected the development of the theatrical performance that is based on "*political commentary*". Forms of *political commentary* theater performance have been activated under the proletarian influence by choosing anti-realism to create new *mise-en-scene* symbols like the use of slides, films and body expressions as narratives in the effort to deliver political ideas in the form of performance. Apart from that, the aesthetic ideas practise speeches that provoke the minds and souls of the audience to go against the hegemonic power of the capitalists, bourgeois and the authorities who oppress the lower class and with regard to gender, race, skin colour, religion and the minority. The effect from the *counter culture* movements also expand the theater as the "*given political commentary space*" that has a certain ideology, vision or revolution, which end point is to ask to audience to fight against the hegemonic power and renew their lives to be more equal and fairer. In other words, forms of theater such as street demonstrations, outside buildings or theater performance venues all contribute to the cause of national democracy by politicizing the mass community to free themselves from the chains of oppression and hegemony.

Through the reformation movement in 1998, it had changed the political landscape in Malaysia stemming from the termination of service of the then-Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Related to this, there existed the *counter culture* movement that had gone rampant in Malaysia when this incident is highlighted. Other than

that, it also raised the political awareness among the people from various sectors such as work fields oppressed by the capitalists, the opposition of environmentalists and the environmental policy, exploitation of women in various fields and gender inequality. Scholars from local universities also emerged in this movement that protested and fought for their rights to go into politics. Thus, the protests over this political flaw were channelled creatively and critically in the mass communication system including the theater medium in the form of stress shows, musical, 'stand up comedy', poetry recital and creative writing. According to Mohd Izuddin Ramli (2016), the empirical study outcome shows that the Klang Valley produces theater activists that also come from the student groups. There is also the *counter culture* movement also comprising of local students who air their democratic voices by protesting against various political issues that threaten democratic rights, public oppression, authority's abuse of power, the injustice of the judiciary system, or even the issues surrounding the power of the bourgeoisie towards the proletariat evident in the performance space.

Thus, the presence of two prolific directors of post-modernist Malay theater named Namron and Harith Amirul who were also former activists and students, have staged two theatrical performances that highlight the political flaws around the nation today. The involvement of both theater directors in succumbing to their inner voices towards the political turmoil, will surely be calling upon the people to see and enjoy these political ideas of protest in the form of performance. In short, in the arts archive of the post-modernist Malay theater created through the creative processes of the two directors with their production teams, other than manifesting the aesthetic value of *mise-en-scene* in the symbol language game through *hybridization*, the stories told also touch on the discourse of general opinion about the political events visualized through their thinking framework. With that, this paper work contends that the political work has a close connection with the post-modernist Malay theater media that also serve as the agent that shapes the public opinion about various issues, especially about political events that are taking place in Malaysia today.

Benefit to the Nation

It is hoped that this research is able to give a contribution of the study towards new political discovery with regard to '*political theater*' or the theatrical performance to be understood by the decoding party. The discovery of the study outcome can serve as a reference in ensuring that there are signs of social equality in confronting the conflicts of hegemony especially involving the issues of gender and development as recommended in the gender development policy in Malaysia.

A new theoretical discovery of this study is able to develop the sharing of knowledge academically through academic presentation in national and international academic seminar on the theme of hegemony channelled in the aesthetic form of '*political theater*' in Malaysia. Apart from that, primary data and the materials discovered can be directed to the students in the teaching and learning process. Other than looking into the paradigm of '*political theater*' in the western context, the study outcome can become the material to study the phenomenon of the '*political theater*' taking place in the local context. In sum, it is significant that the study is able to play its role as the material for teaching and learning about the production of the '*political theater*' that brings with it hegemonic criticisms in the Malay experimental theater performance to the graduates and scholars of public universities.

The result of the study outcome can provide a theoretical support to the aesthetic presentational form of '*political theater*' emerging from the directing work for the younger

generation of post-modernist Malay theater studied. Through the findings, it is anticipated that the study can give a new theoretical conclusive statement compared to the past empirical studies' theories with regard to the hegemonic criticism in the '*political theater*'. Evidence for the study statements verifies the hypothesis of the study by asserting that the representation of the current post-modernist Malay theater has been influenced by the '*political theater*' style, as the medium of criticism over the hegemonic flaw through the theatrical performance being analysed. The result of the study outcome is able to report the study testing on the strategies of the technique of delivery practiced by new-age directors, in forming the aesthetic value of the '*political theater*' in the Malay experimental theater we have today.

Conclusion of the Study Outcome

The post-modernist Malay theater performance contains a new paradigm of thinking, vision or propaganda in its reaction on the political flaws ignited in the Malay world cosmology. Through the theater performance of 'Lembu' directed by Namron and 'Mesin & Kopi' directed by Harith Amirrul, this study concludes that there exists the discourse of political commentary from the local proletariat as directors who question and rediscuss the issue of Malay unity that is found to disintegrate due to different political ideologies among them. Indeed, the performance of 'Lembu' has reflected that Namron and his creative team have this bursting desire or 'id' in translating a reaction into a particular situation by taking into account socio-political issues, so that they get to be discussed or re-discoursed in front of the audience. It is on this stage of post-modernist Malay theater performance, that all issues regarding the socio-political flaws of the disintegrated Malay race is analyzed, synthesized, deconstructed and reconstructed into a new arts discourse. Meanwhile, for the theatrical performance of 'Mesin dan Kopi', the director Harith Amirrul also raises political commentary by way of protesting hegemony through the issues of unfair authority, the grip of capitalism, the exploitation of the work force, the brutality of human trade, gender oppression, ethnic racism or any form of dominance in the social and political institutions of countries like Malaysia. In other words, through the experimental Malay theater performance stage, director Harith Amirul and his creative team had voiced out and debated on the grip of hegemonies that exposed the conflicts of 'subject-predator' and 'object-prey' based on certain contexts.

In manifesting the theme of political events through stimulation, Namron and Harith Amirrul together with their creative team also manipulate the sign system of the performance theater. Thus, the theater director and his creative team are found to have experimented with the sign systems and create these new symbols, signs and meanings into postmodern Malay theater performances as a practical reaction towards the issues of Malay politics and Malay hegemonic power in Malaysia today. The inspiring symbols and signs are also the vision, thoughts, propaganda or the political ideology of the Malaysian Malay that are intended to be carried off, highlighted and shared among the audience by deconstructing the new meaning. The message in the story that talks about the propaganda of 'disintegration of people of the same religion' and the chain of hegemony, can be identified through the linguistic sign system (covering the dialogue utterance of the actor using texts and the context), the sign system on the actors (through dialogue utterance, gesture, movement, posture, action-reaction), the visual sign system *mise-en-scene* (covering the stage set, costume, decoration, lighting, stage effects and others), the *aural* sign system (sound special effect and music). In brief, all these theater sign system had portray various symbols of political commentary to certain contexts and conditions in front on the audiences.

In short, the performance of 'Lembu' by Namron and 'Mesin dan Kopi' directed by Harith Amirrul serve as the response towards the political flaw happening in the Malay society and their working world today. Therefore, post-modernist Malay theater continues to expand its function not only in exposing the postmodern theater performances which prioritise on ritualistic, entertainment and educational value motifs alone, but it is also used by some of the artists who are able to introduce their ideology and propaganda ideas in theatrical performance texts. On a given stage space, the theater has functioned as commentary politics by producing one criticism after another, which is questioning, raising, also discussing the turmoils of 'power' between the dominant and the other subordinates. Through this space, theater is given the opportunity to channel the communication democratically to voice or give commentary towards the inequality of power that not only refers to the authority's power dominance towards the people, but also involving the issues of gender discrimination, race, occupation, institution, political drawback and the power of the globalization.

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