Malay and Islam-Centric national narratives: modern art in Malaysia during the 1980s

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THE 1971 NATIONAL CULTURE CONGRESS could be seen as the first official attempt to shape arts and culture in Malaysia. Inspired by increasingly pro-Malay government policies, Malay intellectuals convened at the University of Malaya in August that year to formulate the country's policy on national culture. Three principles were established, namely, 'Malaysian National Culture must be based on the indigenous culture of the people from the region'; 'Elements from other cultures that are deemed proper and appropriate can be integrated as parts of the National Culture'; and 'Islam as an important element in shaping the national culture'.

Perhaps more influential than the National Culture Congress in arts and culture was a rise in Islamic consciousness and policies from the mid-1970s onwards in Malaysia. This Islamic consciousness emerged from the decolonization movement that could be seen in parallel with the rise of ABIM (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) and the 1978 Iranian Revolution. It can be argued that Islamic consciousness had important implications on the art practices among Malay artists during the 1970s and 1980s.

In general, scholars note that Islamic considerations first emerged conspicuously in modern Malaysian art in the 1980s. It is during this time that more art exhibitions, seminars and scholarly writings began to engage with Islam, through discussions of Islamic art and culture. So much so that many Malay-Muslim artists sought to marry Islamic concepts, in whose midst, their visual representations were made.

Modernist artworks based on Islamic aesthetics include those of Sulaiman Esa, Zakaria Awang, Ahmad Khalid Yusof, and Peninun Amin, among others. These artists can be argued to have positioned themselves in a larger context of Islamic unном (society) by applying Islamic design conventions, such as the Arabic Script or Jawi script, calligraphic motives and the Arabesque, the displays of verses from the Quran or the Hadith and epithets praising God's supremacy, to their art and even shunning the depiction of human and animal figures in their work.

As modern artists, they were not restricted to traditional media, but adopted Islamic aesthetics or philosophy in their art-making. Sulaiman Esa's Naranji series (Fig. 1), for example, is a quest for Islamic aesthetics through artisitic contemplation of traditional Islamic arabesque design. Through the arabesque, Islamic spirituality in the work is closely wedded to the experience of harmony and archetypal reality through the reflection of the One (Allah the Almighty) and the concept of unity of truth.

For the most part, Islamic art in Malaysia thrived because the artists who shunned figurative art did not do so out of Islamic instruction, but because they empathized with the abstraction of the avant-garde. Indeed according to art critic TK Sabapathy, "Art reflecting the global Islamic revitalism in the 1980s has either aligned itself with tendencies in Abstract Expressionism or found kinship with decorative art.

It is also important to note that the Islamisation of modern art in Malaysia was not down to solely the artist. Curatorial decisions played a key role too. The selection of artists and artworks for galleries and exhibitions often adhered to popular expectations of modern Islamic art. As a result such exhibitions and art were easily read as 'Islamic'. It must be noted that the proclamations of the New Economic Policy (NEP), culture policy, and the Islamisation policies were part of the country's nationalist phase, which inevitably reframed art with a nationalistic agenda. This collection of policies reinforced the state-endorsed national identity based on the hegemony of Malay culture despite the country's multi-racial complexion. To conclude, external social and economic factors also shaped Malay art during the late 1970s and 1980s. For example, the economic gains attained by the Malays through the NEP resulted in the emergence of a new Malay middleclass as well. According to Joel S. Kahn, the NEP and the emergence of the new Malay middleclass further bolstered the construction of Malaysian identity through the revitalization of Malay culture in particular. With the resurgence of Islam at that time, it was not surprising that some artists carried their interest in Islam into art to expose some form of national identity.

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An art historical parallax: the subject, spectacle, and myth of/in Juan Luna's *Parisian Life*

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"[f]very age had its own gait, glance, and gesture." Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*

*Parisian Life* (1882), by Filipino artist Juan Luna, features an intimate scene of a man, a woman, and a child, with a woman seated prominently on a banquette and three men at the far left corner. It fetched -59,924 at Christie's auction in Hong Kong in 2002, an exorbitant sum paid by the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS), the pension fund institution of the Philippines.

The painting is a richly layered portrayal of contemporary social norms, gender politics and national allegory. Formal and social analyses reveal a woman, believed to be a prostitute, as the subject of the male gaze. Women in Paris were increasingly seen as a threat to the status quo. If they did not conform to the traditional role of a femme bonne (respectable woman), they were seen as the entertainer, or the prostitute. As a dangerous woman, the prostitute bore the stigma of infecting men with venereal disease. The unregistered prostitute, who constituted a growing labor force in Paris, was regarded as “a site of absolute degradation and dominance, the place where the body became at last an exchange value, a perfect and complete commodity.” In constant circulation like money, yet at times also clandestine, the prostitute could be considered as the spectacle in the flesh, which Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) embodied. Indeed, she represented desire and death, a female body who was both loved and loathed.

*Parisian Life* mirrors the constructions of masculinity and civilty among the three wearing European clothes, “part of a larger attempt at nationalist self-fashioning.” Despite the civilised middle-class body, their brown faces disclose their racial identity. They are identified as the Filipino patriots Jose Rizal, Juan Luna (frontal pose), and Anton Bautista (holding cane handle). They are fixed on the woman whose very appearance in a café is an erotic encounter itself. While Luna’s self-portrait exhibits fatigue or even ennui, Bautista registers the curiosity and pleasure of a voyeur “in a fairly lascivious way” tilting his head toward the sexually objectified cocotte who furtively acknowledges his gaze. Far from heroic, Juan Luna brought to light the hypocrisy and duplicity of his milieu and the general anxiety against the prostitute. Despite of and whether the black umbrella functions as a barricade or signifies the phallic, the dominant iconography of *Parisian Life* still approximates the familiar Old World – patriarchal – whose double standards Luna and the Audiences enjoyed.

While Luna’s body of work crystallized the artistic and economic negotiations he had to perform as a painter, his life and home became the model of the divided self and the imagined community. Contrary to nationalist historiography and its grand, developmental narrative, the growth of the new ‘Filipino’ consciousness was uneven, ambiguous, and problematic. Moreover, the yet-to-be ‘Filipino’ was already endangered. Although the prostitute personified the threat of sexual corruption, moral disintegration and physical death in *Parisian Life*, the faintest allure of the ilustrados was caused, in general, by women and, figuratively, by France.

In sum, Juan Luna’s *Parisian Life* is an Impressionist rendition of an interior of a café inhabited by a cocotte, a dandy, and three ilustrados in Handsomized Paris. It can be read as an ideological unveiling not only of late 19th-century French modernity, but the “gait, glance, and gesture” of the other spectacle and myth that dominates: the Orientalist defamiliarization of the nation-state and the scarcity and fetishism of the Filipino. Indeed, meaning, to echo Jacques Derrida, is always “deferred”.

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Fig. 1 (Above)

References