

Narrative of Malaysian modernity: COVID-19, Malay women portrayals and popular television serials

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Abstract

Academic studies often explore the dynamics between Malay women and popular culture within the context of Malaysian modernity. Researchers commonly investigate resistance to the government's moral initiatives for women in society. This article examines how popular culture, specifically serial television drama, depicts the portrayal of Malay women during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the concepts of obedience, disobedience, and control. The government's "Duduk Rumah" [Stay at home] and "Kita Jaga Kita" [We take care of ourselves] campaigns, initiated by then Prime Minister Muhyidin Yassin to combat the COVID-19 epidemic, placed additional burdens on women, assigning them significant domestic responsibilities as household managers, including the well-being and education of their children, as well as maintaining family cohesion. We argue that these targeted government policies exacerbated the concerns and uncertainties experienced by Malay women during lockdowns. Furthermore, we contend that the government demonstrated less sensitivity, care, or coordination in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to an increase in domestic violence, divorce, depression, and emotional stress among Malay women. These challenges were prominently depicted in Malay television serials, serving as a vital platform for contemplating the impact of the government's moral initiatives on Malay women. Our research offers insights into the enduring progress, or lack thereof, in the status of women both within and beyond the domestic sphere, as part of Malaysia's pursuit of modernity.

Keywords: Malay women, serial drama, Malaysian modernity, COVID-19, lockdown

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How to cite this article in APA

Syed, Md. A., Shamshudeen, R. I., Runnel, C., & Abidin, M. Z. Z. (2020). TNarrative of Malaysian modernity: COVID-19, Malay women portrayals and popular television serials. *Plaridel*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.52518/2023-11ssra>

Introduction

The Malaysian government's implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in March 2020 (Rahim, 2020; Tang, 2020), followed by the declaration of emergency in January 2021 (Chan & Harun, 2021), placed women yet again at odds with the notion of Malaysian modernity. Apart from the "Stay at Home" campaign on social media and television, which was taken largely as another form of regressive rhetoric against women, the government's failure to expedite the vaccination process hampered the local economy and affected many aspects of domestic life. During the period of movement control and emergency, it became apparent that domestic violence, divorce, child neglect, family health, and emotional stress were all on the rise ("Commentary on Malaysia's women and girls, MCO 3.0 and Covid-19 vaccine rollout," 2021). Despite the fact that the government stated unequivocally that women played an important role in providing moral and financial support to the family during the pandemic (Basyir, 2021), the women's narrative, particularly that of Malay women, became complex and confused, as new-found freedoms and opportunities for women outside the home were eroded under the pressures of lockdown. The issues and overwhelming challenges of domestic duty were clearly displayed in various cultural artifacts, particularly in popular serial dramas.

Malaysia is a patriarchal society and Malay women are frequently put under scrutiny by religious and government authorities who expect obedience to the state (Stivens, 1998a; Shamshudeen & Morris, 2014). However, women are often caught in a state of uncertainty, required to balance their participation in national modernity projects with the need to be dutiful in managing domestic tasks at home. The COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a global modern health crisis and hit Malaysia particularly hard, produced a variety of narratives about Malay women and their relationship with Malaysian modernity, particularly during the Movement Control Order (MCO). We became aware that ordinary people were not doing well under lockdown, and anecdotally women were bearing the brunt of the discontent. Joy Kooi-Chin Tong and Bryan S. Turner (2008) with regards to women's participation in Malaysian modernity, the televisual medium consistently reflects the lives of ordinary women throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period. This facility was especially valuable during the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) and Emergency.

Confined to the home, Malay serial drama was one of the main sources of entertainment. For example, the serial drama *7 Hari Mencintaiku* [7 Days of Loving Me] attracted 12 million viewers in the first year of the COVID-19 and MCO pandemics (Omar, 2020). Needless to say, Malay serial dramas became the center of attention especially among women audience. This

study specifically focuses on two Malay serial dramas: *Hadiah Dari Tuhan* [Gift from God] and *Covid oh Covid!*, Unlike *7 Hari Mencintaiku*, these two dramas were produced and broadcast during the MCO period. The depiction of women and their roles in these two serial dramas takes center stage, as the narratives explore the relationship between female characters and the concept of Malaysian modernity. The genre, as expected, featured love issues, family conflicts, and materialistic lifestyles. However, we suggest that a more important agenda in that moment was to display the ideological structures—Malay customs and Islamic values—at the core construction of Malay feminine identity.

This fantasy vision of ideal womanhood—characterized by being controlled, obedient to a masculine order, and solely immersed in family matters—inevitably clashes with the appeal of new ideas surrounding meaningful existence, agency, and exciting adventures beyond domestic chores (Stivens, 1998a). It is crucial to acknowledge that Malay women can still face unequal treatment under patriarchal laws, both in real life and in the portrayal of women in popular culture, such as serial television dramas (Md Syed & Runnel, 2014), which often perpetuate gender stereotypes and restrict women's agency and representation. Therefore, this study examines how two selected serial television dramas—*Hadiah Dari Tuhan* [Gift from God] (Loy, 2021) and *Covid oh Covid!* (Mokhtar, 2021)—depict and portray the complexities and challenges experienced by Malay women during the COVID-19 period. Specifically, it explores their narrative of modernity in light of increased issues such as domestic violence, divorce, child neglect, family health, and emotional stress under the pressures of movement control and emergency measures.

Women, television and representation of modernity

The representation of women in media has a significant impact on shaping and reflecting societal attitudes and norms, which in turn affects how people perceive the world and themselves. The portrayal of women in television has been a key lens through which researchers have examined the dynamics of modernity, looking at how their representation reflects, contests, or reinforces societal notions of progress, gender roles, and changing cultural norms. According to Helen Wood (2005), the feminist perspective has consistently emphasized the significance of subjectivity when examining the impact of television on women's lives. Throughout the history of feminist scholarship, the exploration of subjectivity has remained a focal point in comprehending the role of television in shaping women's experiences. Arjun Appadurai (1996) contends that electronic media plays a crucial role in influencing and transforming popular imagination in today's

society. He emphasizes that these media forms, with their new capabilities and structures, significantly alter the landscape of mass communication. This transformation of mass mediation is particularly relevant to the relationship between women and modernity, as electronic media offers fresh opportunities and frameworks for constructing imagined identities and alternative realities.

Serial television dramas have long been a focal point for examining the representation and evolving roles of women within popular culture. Scholarly research on women and media representation has focused on the portrayal of women, stereotypes, and power dynamics across various forms of media. Previous studies by television serials and soap opera scholars (Ang, 1985; Brown, 1994; Hobson, 2003; Lin & Tong, 2008; Maclachlan & Chua, 2004; Spence, 2005) extensively explored the politics of consumption in media, television, and popular culture concerning women, but limited research has been conducted on Malay women. Many research have looked at how women are portrayed in the media and on television, identifying common stereotypes and misconceptions about women's roles (Elasmar et al., 1999; Kaul, & Sahni, 2010; Lotz, & Ross, 2004; Sumiko, 1980). Feminist media studies emerged during the 1960s and 1970s as part of the larger feminist movement, aiming to critically analyze how the media portrays women and challenge their marginalization, stereotypes, and objectification in popular culture. Since then, feminist scholars and researchers have made significant contributions to the field, exploring a wide range of topics and methodologies. One important area of study within feminist television and media studies is the analysis of representation. Scholars examine how women are portrayed in the media, including the roles they play, their physical appearances, and the narratives surrounding them. This analysis often brings attention to issues such as the excessive focus on women's appearance, the limited range of available roles for female characters, and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to analyze the representation of women in media as the lockdown has altered the roles of women primarily within domestic and family-related matters.

The representation of women in the media has long been debated as it portrayed women with certain stereotypes and misconceptions. For instance, studies have emphasized the underrepresentation of women in main roles, their confined/restricted range of character types (such as the nurturing mother, the femme fatale) (Doane, 1991), and also the focus on women's physical attractiveness compared to other values/strengths that can set a high standard on women (Lotz & Ross, 2004). This research has shed insights into how media promote cultural expectations and maintain

gender stereotypes. For example, a study of the post-Islamization era, Saman Talib and Zara Idrees (2012) examined the contemporary role of media, particularly soap operas and daytime talk shows in women disempowerment.

Rowan Howard-Williams and Elihu Katz (2013) stated that television has created a contextual impact by providing different role models for kids, which upset the traditional balance between males and females. According to James Lull (1988:257), television, particularly in developed countries, strengthens the “patriarchal constitution of women” and separates and expands the emotional priorities, personal interests, and social responsibilities of the sexes. Several studies have attempted to map the changes in women’s representation in media (Howard-Williams, & Katz, 2013; Pietaryte & Suzina, 2023;) and there are many research that has been concentrated on Muslim women in media (Fauzi et al., 2020; Muhammad, 2018; Hussin et al., 2015; Hassim, 2014; Hirji, 2011;).

Malay women and modernity

The concept of modernity emerged after the Age of Enlightenment around the 18th century (Giddens, 1990). Scientific and technological advancement brought new understandings, ideas, and the assumption of rational debate to every aspect of daily living (Pathak, 1998), thus eroding traditional authorities and supplanting ill-formed superstitions, religious beliefs, and practices. Starting in the West the notions of industrial progress, competition, and economic aggrandizement captured the imagination of private individuals and governments, and new knowledge and education were valued as competitive advantages on the route to success. Cottage industries and rural living gave way to manufacturing and trading companies, urbanization, and the canalization of human beings into a factory-style workforce. The rolling juggernaut of modernity led to the existence of new beliefs, practices, and institutions, such as the formation of democratic systems, the right to education, unions, universities, political parties, and other nation-building movements which were then exported globally from the West but received with suspicion in traditional and conservative societies.

Nonetheless, the world turned towards capitalism and consumerism and the gap between the “Haves” and the “Have-nots” widened. Shaun Moores (2000) observes, “[G]lobalizing modernity does not have the same universal significance for all the planet’s inhabitants, not even for those who live in the relatively affluent ‘first world’” (p. 6). David Birch et. al. (2001) writes that aggregated ideologies and philosophies of modernity— notions of universal rights, freedoms, and individual equality—only apply to certain groups, and

minorities such as women, the lower classes, and indigenous peoples did not enjoy this privilege in total. Anthony Giddens (1991) suggests that the concept of modernity in the West was one of historical progression, marked by change and separation from outdated and outmoded ways of doing things. An understanding of Malaysian modernity however is not so fluid or unilateral. Alongside the desire for industrial progress and economic success on the world stage, tradition remained the touchstone of cultural practices. Islamic religion and customary law had an accepted place in the process of shaping Malaysian society. Terms such as reclamation and reinvention were often used by the government to describe the concept of Malaysian modernity, differentiating the country's natural processes from what was perceived as a soulless Western phenomenon. The government reinforced the geopolitical divide between East and West in its rhetoric, with talk of Asian values, *Melayu Baru*¹, *Islam Hadhari*², *1 Malaysia*³ and Vision 2020⁴ which was driven through government economic policies such as the New Economic Policy (NEP)⁵, emphasizing the desirability of a unique national identity based upon traditional structures (Md Syed, 2013). However, this bias towards tradition simply perpetuated a gendered inequality in society, entrenched over time and difficult to revise.

Malay women had been naturalized by society to operate in the domestic space and practice certain expressions of femininity that kept them subservient to male authority. What was deemed suitable and appropriate by the government for contemporary Malay women and girls was determined to be “domestic” and therefore “feminine” (Healey, 1994, p. 11). The cultural and political regimes gradually adapted to grant Malay women a measure of self-determination and the kind of autonomy envisioned for women in Western modernity. However, it still suited authorities to set immutable moral standards and desirable behaviors that would determine feminine identity and responsibilities. Women were placed into the shameful position of kowtowing to masculine dictates and obediently accepting the role of scapegoats bestowed upon them, a ploy, we suggest, meant to divert attention from the inadequacies of government in dealing with issues. The campaign “*Utamakan Keluarga Semakin Hari Semakin Sayang*” [Family First—Bring Your Heart Home], launched in the first decade of the 2000s, was designed to make the institution of the family a major subject for criticism, blaming women's deviance from their primary responsibilities in the home for the existence of certain social problems in the country (Md Syed, 2011).

Women were expected to hold the domestic fort, overseeing a harmonious household, managing the family, and dispensing love and attention to the man of the house and the children. The role was not easy to

perform, especially with the disjunction between a relatively stable, slow-paced village lifestyle, coupled with the support structures of an extended family, and the trials of a nuclear family in a stressful urban setting, in which children were often left to their own devices, lacked adult guidance and came of age too quickly for real maturity. Problems were laid at the door of “weak” women who could not perform their traditional duty on the home front while the country revved up its economy. In the 1980s and 1990s, social issues involving Malay women—*Minah Karan*⁶ and *Bohsia*⁷—were the focus of popular debate (Ong, 1987; Stivens, 2012), while in 2002 authorities exhorted Malay women to “Uphold our family values” (“Uphold our family values, urges Dr M,” 2002).

In all, it is hardly surprising that women’s liberation from unfair patriarchal domination and the “oppression of the home” were taken up as serious markers of the progress of modernity. Rita Felski (1992) writes, “Categories of periodization and the criteria used to define them appear profoundly altered when women become the focal point of inquiry instead of men” (p.139). When women become the central focus of historical inquiry, the conventional understanding of historical periods and the criteria used to define them is challenged and reshaped. Felski’s statement emphasizes the need to re-evaluate and revise historical narratives to be more inclusive and representative, particularly in relation to women’s rights and justice.

Malay women: Feminine identity and change

Charlotte Brunson (2005) argues that a feminist politics of representation has to engage with the social reader as well as the social text. Ideologically serial drama was constructed out of “personal life” and realised through everyday relationships—romance, familial, and family rituals (birth, death, engagement, marriage, divorce). The genre largely addressed the feminine consumer as mother, wife, and carer, although in rebound and by comparison the masculine domain—public and private—inevitably comes under scrutiny (Md Syed, 2013). Extra-textual artifacts were also designed to capture attention and fill women’s days, occupying the time slots between domestic duties, or indeed staving off the boredom of tedious work. Popular culture, such as novels, magazines, interviews, cookbooks, fashion, and advertising, took their place in shaping women’s identities. Women’s magazines published in the 1980s and 1990s focused on the refinement of traditions in the context of Malaysian modernization (Stivens, 1994).

The Malay middle class (or New Malays) prioritized custom, Islam, and the family as the backbone of Malay modernity. The Islamic movement in government administration, for instance, saw their way in rewriting the

hijab as a modern symbol of Malay femininity. Debate and judgment on pious obedience aside, as a symbol of patriarchal oppression, or as a modern fashion accessory, the hijab retained its place as cultural accoutrement in Malay women's lives. Yet the image of Malay women in popular magazines changed and diversified over time (Md Syed, 2011). The trend expanded in the twenty-first century with social media and the growing cult of "influencers," promoting new images and endorsing the consumption of new commodities. Women's magazines became more adventurous, embracing in public hitherto sensitive or taboo subjects like husband/wife relationships, moral duty, personal choice in dress, social deviance, equality, drugs, abuse and the list of issues inevitably goes on according to community concerns (Stivens, 1998b). Malay women, either wearing headscarves or not, had their own ways of interpreting modernity and subtly adjusting their lifestyles, even though their approach might undermine the existing system (Ong, 2006).

Margaret Lock and Patricia Kaufert (1998) and Linda Rae Bennett (2005) argued that resistance to hegemonic discourse was not always common practice in women's lives. Embedded tradition, fear of authorities, dread of public humiliation, and loss of material comfort were often the sticking points that prevented women from demanding gender equality and social autonomy. Unused to outright disobedience to the masculine order, they still feared punishment and the possibility of exclusion from the protection of the community. Bennett observed in relation to extramarital sex in Mataram Indonesia that women were more likely to engage in private but refuse to admit the deed in public—predisposing towards a relatively friction-free way of expressing their disagreement with traditional gender structures in the local culture. In another instance, as observed by Aihwa Ong (1987), Malay women in Malaysia who became involved in the early modernity projects through working in electronics factories, exhibited social ills that worried parents. Waged labor set them free of parental control, they had more independence and could socialize freely; consequently, they established relationships with men of other races and were stigmatized as non-Malays (outsiders) at home. They were also unfairly branded *en masse* as wasteful and immoral (Ong, 1987; 1990).

The electronic factories might have liberated Malay women from parental controls; however, the workplace imposed a new capitalist hierarchy of discipline that demanded standards of efficiency in production—often foreign-controlled. Frequent hysterical seizures by women in factories were perceived as subtle resistance to masculine systems that ignored the needs of women (Ong, 1990). The phenomenon of *bohsia* [promiscuous girl] also emerged in the early 1990s, evidence of the disobedience of Malay girls who

expressed their opposition to the traditionally gendered dictates controlling women's freedom of choice, behavior, and sexuality, by running away from home and hanging out with other like minds in the urban areas of Kuala Lumpur and Johore Bahru, defiantly engaging in sexual activities. Frequently under disapproval, female figures were used to construct metaphorical representations in popular culture artifacts, reproducing the social ills and agonisms of modernity (Stivens, 1998b; 1994). Male counterparts were not subjected to the same moral scrutiny or paranoia about their activities.

Malay women were actively interested in the representation of non-Western modernity, especially from East Asian countries and regions such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The popularity of local serial dramas rose in the late 2000s through *Nur Kasih* [The Love of Nur] which focused on family and religious themes. However, the 2000s saw the growth of satellite television and social media, giving Malay women access to the modern world without government controls on content. Serial drama had developed within sociological paradigms dominated by emotional realism and the social, holding up a mirror to reflect society (Ang, 1985). *Mises-en-scene* and production techniques had to speak to the audience in familiar terms. Women became experts in the field of interpretation, intimate with the impact of modernity on daily life. However, Brunson (2005) suggests that if we want to learn anything new about family matters, the way forward in research is to focus on the discursive context in which meanings are made. Researchers had to validate audience expertise and means of expression (e.g., Seiter, 1999; Hobson, 2003). Face-to-face conversations, letters, and interviews would produce the vocabulary, language, and confidence for women to speak out about issues. Andrea Press (1991) was moved to explore the diversity of reception between middle-class and working-class women from a gendered perspective. She recognized that when women viewers responded to television serial dramas they spoke personally and as individuals caught up in their unique webs of circumstance. Speaking of women generally meant nothing particular in practical terms.

The portrayal of Malay women on television for example reflects their intricate relationship with modernity and captures the evolving social, cultural, and gender dynamics within Malay society. These television representations often depict Malay women as navigating the delicate balance between traditional beliefs and modern aspirations in the contemporary context. Such portrayals underscore their agency and resilience as they confront changing societal norms and strive for personal growth and empowerment (Md Syed et al., 2015). While certain depictions may align with conventional gender roles and expectations, others challenge these norms by presenting Malay women as active participants in shaping their

own lives and contributing to broader discussions on modernization. Despite the presence of external influences and commercialization that pose a threat to Malay culture, each television fiction ultimately emphasizes principles of repentance and forgiveness, reinforcing the core values of the Malay/Muslim community.

These portrayals aim to engage viewers with fundamental Malay/Muslim precepts while highlighting the potential for personal transformation and growth. However, it is important to note that some negative portrayals of women also exist, perpetuating regional cultural stereotypes, traditional identity, and conservative values that define the ideal of Malay womanhood. These portrayals accuse women of neglecting their domestic responsibilities in favor of frivolous pursuits, sexualizing them inappropriately, attributing the breakdown of the family and issues stemming from modernity to their actions, and assigning them responsibility for various societal problems (Bernama, 2006a, 2006b). Thus, the portrayal of Malay women on television reflects both the nuanced complexities of their relationship with modernity and the evolving dynamics within Malay society. While some depictions emphasize agency, resilience, and personal development, others reinforce traditional stereotypes and negative perceptions. It is crucial to critically examine these portrayals to foster a more inclusive and empowering representation of Malay women in the media.

Panic and uncertainty, “disease narratives” and the lowly status of women

Postmodern criticism, as a reaction to the foibles of modernity, throws up the overarching idea that modernity is “multiple”, “liquid” and about making a difference through the inauguration of changes in society (Lee, 2006). The concept of reflexive modernity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990) provides a useful framework for discussion of the global health crisis and the endemic threats of COVID-19. The diverse responses to the pandemic between countries, let alone ordinary people, created a litany of emotions, risk factors, uncertainties, fear, and panic. Populations were traumatized and bereft. Jacqueline Foertsch (2001, p. 4) stated that the fear of epidemics or plague of fears cannot be eradicated in society—even though the threats may not exist and there are facilities in advanced scientific and medical fields to combat the onslaught. The Malaysian government boasted about its unique modernity; however, its competence, provisions, and priorities were tested and judged during the event. Was the health system, including hospitals and clinics, able to withstand the pressure?

Media narratives often reflect cultural anxieties and can commodify and consume disease-related content for entertainment purposes. These

narratives have the potential to influence public perceptions and shape attitudes toward health issues. The government's communication and media efforts regarding COVID-19 management can leverage popular culture, such as serial dramas, to disseminate information and raise awareness. By incorporating accurate and relevant health messaging within these popular media platforms, the government can effectively reach and engage audiences, providing them with valuable information and promoting responsible behavior during the pandemic. The high literacy rate among Malay women today gives them the opportunity to obtain information about COVID-19 from media sources other than government-controlled propaganda (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2022). Tomes (2002), suggests that an awareness of disease transmission and epidemics infused popular culture from multiple sources with an emphasis on commodification and consumption. He argues that "narratives of disease serve not only as personal accounts or ideological markers of cultural anxieties; they also constitute potentially profitable forms of news and entertainment" (p. 627).

News reports on domestic abuse and violence against women increased when the MCO was implemented by the government in early 2020 (Rahim, 2020). The government chose to ignore the appearance of "disease narratives" on popular media platforms. It refused to recognize that close confinement between family members could put stress on relationships and that the unrelenting oppression of domestic duties was a drain on women's physical and emotional strength. The loss of income for both men and women were also a source of anxiety between couples who had to find the wherewithal to make ends meet (Commentary on Malaysia's women and girls, MCO 3.0 and Covid-19 vaccine rollout, 2021). The PRIHATIN Economic Stimulus Package (ESP) presented by the Prime Minister did nothing to support or emancipate women who were vulnerable to domestic violence (Tengku Nur Qistina, 2020). They were trapped in the home. Women were also made invisible, and neglected in the National Recovery Plan presented by the then Prime Minister in parliament ("*Teks ucapan pelan pemulihan negara—mesyuarat khas penggal ketiga parlimen keempat belas sidang dewan rakyat*") [Speech on the National Recovery Plan - Special Session of the Fourteenth Parliament, Third Term House of Representatives Meeting], 2021).

A sexist government

During COVID-19 women could vent on social media which provided platforms for gossip, comment, and criticism. Topics were not only health-related but also explored other issues—morals, family dilemmas, and

personal frustration about freedom and surveillance in public and private. However, the ante was upped among Malay women during COVID-19 after the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development released a public service poster giving tips on how to manage husbands and households during the Movement Control Order (MCO). Interestingly, the message was built based on a joke inspired by the popular Japanese cartoon, *Doraemon*. The advice included such jocular gems as “...speaking in “*Doraemon’s* voice” and giggling coyly...in some cases, our partner needs to be ‘told’ of their responsibility...present yourself as per usual, wear makeup and dress neatly...” (Zoey, 2020, para. 11). This poster sparked outrage among the public, NGOs, and local feminist groups who claimed the government was sexist and controlling, even in private spaces. How could the ministry appointed to maintain the status of women fail to see the bigger issues? Women were suffering as a result of the protracted Movement Control Order (MCO). They were under duress and in danger of abuse from the masculine regime which determined their lives (Commentary on Malaysia’s women and girls, MCO 3.0 and Covid-19 vaccine rollout, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a stressful event that revealed the cracks in society and often brought out the worst in terms of group-think behavior. Malay girls were put under pressure not to make waves. For example, a rape joke by a teacher was revealed on social media by school student Ain Husniza, who was bullied at school as a result (“The Malaysian schoolgirl using TikTok to challenge school abuse,” 2021). Her behavior in criticizing the actions of a male teacher on social media not only received rape threats from classmates but also criticism from other women on the grounds of disrespecting the teacher (Yusof, 2021). If in the 80s and 90s, Malay girls working in electronics factories were stereotyped as *minah karan* [non-Malay] and those who liked to hang out in urban areas were called *bohsia* [Promiscuous girl] (Ong, 1987; Stivens, 2012), Malay girls who speak out against sexual harassment and misogyny were branded as children of the devil on social media (The 17-year-old exposing rape culture in Malaysian schools, 2021). This phenomenon was nothing new in Malay culture. According to Norani Othman (1998), women were easy targets for oppressive criticism among political leaders and among women themselves:

Frequently it was argued that women either brought these problems upon themselves by their own provocative or careless behaviour, or even if they did not, it was women’s responsibility to uphold ‘high moral’ standards that would restrain men from committing excesses. By holding women

responsible, these views blamed women, either as victims or as instigators themselves. (p. 158)

The control and freedom of Malay women during COVID-19 was hotly debated and produced a raft of “new norms” to curtail their liberties—practices of physical imprisonment and compliance with SOPs and isolation. Malay women, especially mothers and wives at home, were held responsible for health and the levels of COVID-19 infection in their household and vigilance took its toll. Cheryl Krasnick Warsh (2011) expresses the view that the concept of health with reference to women was quite different from the culpability expected of men. Women had to be willing to sacrifice, diligent, and concerned about the environment and always subject to the best advice from others, on food, appearance, health issues, and family concerns. Women had to listen to the experts and do as they were told. Malay women were oppressed, stressed, and became depressed in the home environment. Florence Thibaut and Patricia Cremers (2020) argue that the increase in domestic workload during COVID-19, due to the lockdown and quarantine process, in most cases affected women more than men. Sheena Kaur (2020) suggests that women suffered long-term trauma.

Malay women did not fare well under COVID-19. If their material lot in life had improved under a regime dedicated to progress under the thrust of modernity, then their status in a patriarchy regressed under the misogyny of traditional rule. Power and authority were on the side of men who did not always behave with decency and respect for the women and girls in their lives. Housewives were expected to be obedient and appease their husbands and fathers tempers with a show of female submission, while Malay girls who exposed inappropriate behavior by their teachers were subjected to personal attacks, bullied, shamed, and punished by savage and ill-educated community watchdogs (Mokhtar, 2021). “Disease narratives” (Foertsch, 2001) multiplied on social media as symptoms of malaise but were quickly taken up by other popular forums, including soapies and Malay serial dramas.

Malay serial dramas, being a popular medium, also took up these disease narratives and incorporated them into their storylines. By featuring these narratives and characters in their episodes, the dramas shed light on the lived experiences of women during the pandemic and the challenges they faced in oppressive and controlling environments. Through the portrayal of women’s experiences in these dramas, issues of gender inequality, oppression, and control are brought to the forefront of public consciousness. This can serve as a means of raising awareness and sparking discussions about the need for gender equality and the eradication of oppressive practices.

By amplifying the voices and experiences of women, Malay serial dramas have the potential to challenge societal norms and contribute to a shift in attitudes and behaviors. They can serve as platforms for empowerment and encourage viewers to question and challenge oppressive practices and gender-based violence. Malay serial dramas provide an avenue for representation and exploration of the lived experiences of women during the pandemic, shedding light on the oppressive and controlling dynamics that exist within Malaysian society. By doing so, they can stimulate important discussions and potentially catalyze change toward a more equitable and inclusive society.

Methodology

This research follows the literary precedent of textual analysis, focusing on two popular Malay dramas aired during the MCO period, namely *Hadiah Dari Tuhan* [Gift from God] (Loy, 2021) and *Covid oh Covid!* [Mokhtar, 2021]. Our analysis pivots on the portrayal of female characters. These two serial dramas take up the theme of pandemic and family spirit and are broadcast on local television stations in prime time to raise awareness about the threat of COVID-19. Alan Mckee (2020) suggests that the study of media texts allows researchers to see how the culture of a particular society is used to understand what happens in everyday life. This argument is supported by Bonnie Brennen (2013) who considers text to be a cultural artifact that offers information about social practices, representations, and assumptions. We presuppose these popular texts will provide critical insight by way of fictional models, into the predicaments of Malay women under the COVID-19 strictures and the drivers of Malaysian modernity.

As mentioned earlier, Malay customs and Islamic values play a major role in constructing the way Malay women should be modernized. For example, they are expected to be obedient, genteel, and listen to their husband as the core construction of their modern identity. Domestic abuse and crimes against women have increased during the MCO phase implemented by the government in 2020. The MCO has made Malay women a target of government criticism, especially when they express disobedience or defy patriarchal control. Consequently, they are deemed as going against the patriarchal framework that defines modern and ideal women. Thus, the main focus of analysis in two Malay dramas— *Hadiah dari Tuhan* [Gift from God] (Loy, 2021) and *'Covid oh Covid!'* (Mokhtar, 2021)—revolves around obedience, disobedience, and control, which are often associated with the discourse and criticism surrounding Malay women, particularly during the MCO period. These two dramas were chosen due to the diverse female characters they portray, who exhibit obedience, disobedience, and

the ability to negotiate the control imposed by male characters over their lives.

Specific episodes were selected as they prominently highlight these three main issues through dialogues that discuss the identity of distressed women in the phase of COVID-19. This involves carefully examining the content of the TV program and identifying episodes or scenes that prominently feature the portrayal of Malay women in relation to the aims of the study that involve obedience, disobedience, and control. By focusing on episodes or scenes that directly address or exemplify these aspects, researchers can gather relevant data to analyze the nuances of representation and power dynamics at play. The rationale of the selection ensures that the chosen episodes or scenes serve as valuable sources for capturing the range of portrayals of Malay women in relation to obedience, disobedience, and control. Researchers can consider various factors, such as the characters involved, the narrative context, the dialogue, and the visual cues, to determine the episodes or scenes that best align with our research objectives. This method allows for a systematic and purposeful approach to textual analysis, enabling us to delve into the specific dynamics of representation and power negotiation that shape the depiction of Malay women in the selected TV program or scene.

***Hadiah dari Tuhan* [Gift from God]: Malay women's obedience and disobedience to the "Rule" in the midst of the global health crisis**

This serial drama portrays the lives of three teenagers from different social class backgrounds who reside in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The drama revolves around Qul, a working-class individual living in a low-cost flat with his sister and grandmother; Ika, a middle-class girl residing in a terrace housing area with her nurse mother; and Bella, who hails from an affluent upper-class family and lives with her successful entrepreneur parents. Titled *Hadiah Dari Tuhan* [Gift from God], this drama was aired on the private television station TV3 during the lockdown period and stands out as one of the early television programs to shed light on the impact of COVID-19 on the everyday lives of Malaysians. The significance of this drama lies in its portrayal of several female characters who offer support to the main characters—Qul, Ika, and Bella—while also being connected through intricate relationships involving children, husbands, and patients.

Notable among them are Jannah, Ika's mother, and Rossa, the wife of Dr. Zabidi, both of whom work on the frontlines at a hospital unit during the pandemic, including the management of patients such as Qul's infected grandmother. Additionally, Khatty, Bella's mother, is depicted as a successful entrepreneur who confronts various challenges, including opposition from

her husband and in-laws that restrict her decision-making authority. The analysis of three specific episodes—6, 8, and 9—illuminates the narrative, characters, and dialogue, providing insights into the concept of obedience and disobedience. These insights extend beyond compliance with COVID-19 regulations to encompass the patriarchal control experienced during the global pandemic. This exploration focuses on the role of women as mothers, wives, and household managers, who often face dilemmas within the rule or framework of Malay patriarchy, leading to conflicts and instances of oppression.

Roziah Omar (1994) states that Malay custom provides a framework and guide for Malay women who were interpolated since childhood into a patriarchal model of relationships. The training emphasized a characteristically feminine appearance, a shy and humble demeanor, and loyalty and obedience to parents. The object was to preserve and strengthen the impression of family unity, dignity, and honor (Healey, 1994; Ong, 1995). In Malay Islamic tradition, a good and perfect wife or daughter was obedient and submissive to the requests of her husband and father and in return, she was promised the blessings of life in this world and the hereafter. The loyalty and obedience owed to parents were transferred to the husband after marriage (Muhamad et al., 2019).

Custom and Islamic tradition naturally provides the moral compass for women in society. Jannah and Rossa, in *Hadih Dari Tuhan* [Gift from God] (Loy, 2021) are products of the system. However, Jannah chooses to divorce after rejecting her husband's desire to marry another woman. After the divorce she has to raise her daughter (named Ika) alone, coping with the stress of long hours at the hospital where she works and the hardship of coming home late due to her erratic working hours as the head nurse. Jannah is portrayed as gentle and religiously strong. She reminds her daughter to always be patient with all the trials of life, like the COVID-19 pandemic, and not to abandon prayers. Despite being divorced, Jannah's loyalty and obedience to her ex-husband is expressed through her *redha* [goodwill] attitude if her daughter Ika still wants to meet him. She says,

A father and his child's relationship can't be broken. But I no longer have a relationship with him. So, if you want to see or call him, I give you permission. (Loy, 2021, Ep. 8, 15.24 -15.54)

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country that is yet bound by Islamic law, an essentialism at the core of Malay modernity. The Islamic movement urges women to play the role of faithful wives and selfless mothers (Anwar, 2001). In the Islamic code, under Shariah Law, a husband

can remarry; however, no one questions whether the wife acquiesces, or whether the permission obtained is genuine and does not involve emotional intimidation and physical abuse (Abdullah & Khairuddin, 2009, p. 37). The issue of a woman's unquestioning obedience to her husband in the context of marriage institutions in Malaysia was called into question with the launch of the Husband's Obedient Wives Club by the Global Ikhwan Group⁹—a corporate company developed by former members of the Al-Arqam organization (Izharuddin, 2021). The objectives of this club were harshly criticized by local feminist movements who saw their misogynist intent as a means to further strengthen the influence of patriarchal systems.

Jannah is positioned on the horns of a dilemma. Her decision to divorce after her husband threatens to marry another goes against the moral compass of Malay society regarding the unity of the family. Yet she is a modern career woman and financially independent. She can afford to ignore the pressures of customary loyalties and take full responsibility for her daughter. However, women viewers of the drama might easily recognize the case that women who are completely dependent on their husbands could very well experience divorce as detrimental to their mental health and an untenable financial burden (Syed Hassan, 1986). The figure of Jannah, by comparison, provides a strong feminine role model, subtly endorsing the need for strategic disobedience in the interests of social change. Financial security and courage empower her to make a happy life for herself as a single mother with widowed status.

The term widow destabilizes the institution of marriage in Malay society. Widows are a sensitive split subject. Ong (1995) suggests widows are stigmatized as immoral and often accused of kidnapping other women's husbands. Dutiful wives are often jealous and resent a widow's new-found independence. Their appearance had to be repressed and controlled—not too attractive, entertaining, or alluring, lest men forget their responsibilities to their families and run amuck in pursuit. Both Indonesian and Malaysian societies prefer to relegate widows to a lowly position as unprotected and sexually vulnerable (Parker, 2016). Jannah's position as a widow is however ambivalent.

Jannah is a single mother who has a close professional relationship with Dr Zabidi. As the head nurse, she always made sure that Dr Zabidi was not stressed when treating patients. Although this relationship is professional in nature, the obedience and compliance exhibited by Jannah for every instruction given by Dr Zabidi still creates suspicion. Rossa often assumes her husband Dr Zabidi is deliberately looking for excuses to come home late and avoid his responsibilities as a husband and father. The workload and stress of the COVID-19 pandemic push Rossa's relationship into a state

of uncertainty, and she doubts her husband's honesty. She feels neglected and drained by domestic duties. Rossa voices her dissatisfaction and sees divorce as the only solution:

Mum, I don't know what else to do. I've done everything. I followed your advice, mum. I take care of his meals. I take care of his outfits...he looks fine now until I saw his video with that divorcee. It's true, it's not slander. It's really that divorcee...I don't want to be in a polygamy marriage...if we ever get a divorce, I won't give Adli to him. (Loy, 2021, Ep. 6, 13.87-14.76)

A cold husband/wife relationship is also examined through the figure of Kathy, in the drama *Hadiah Dari Tuhan* [Gift from God] (Loy, 2021), Khatty is portrayed as an independent woman with her income. She is busy working from home throughout the MCO. However, her eye-catching dress style and lack of cooking skills irked her husband and mother-in-law. The Islamic code expects women to dress modestly. For example, women workers in Kelantan were asked to wear headscarves and not to wear lipstick for fear their appearance would incite immoral incidents. Items of dress like the hijab were the subject of debate in the 1980s and 1990s, as a symbol for Malay middle-class women who wished to make public their Islamic support (Anwar, 1987). Again the niqab, worn with or without the hijab, was popularised by local celebrity, Neelofa, during the MCO phase (Alhamzah, 2020). The face-covering was seen as a trendy option to replace surgical face masks to prevent COVID-19 transmission (Dzulkifly, 2021). However, the Malaysian Ministry of Health disputed the effectiveness of the niqab in preventing infection and advised face masks should always be of the surgical variety for safety purposes (Loheswar, 2020).

Khatty works hard to build a business empire and make a profit; however, she does not allow her work to detract her from loyalty and obedience to her commitment to be a good wife. She never complains about doing all the domestic chores like cooking, washing clothes, and catering to all the requests of her mother-in-law despite her job as a company director. However, Khatty begins to show disobedience after finding out about an affair and a COVID-19 infection that her husband, Shahir, tries to keep secret. Trust is broken and she withdraws from any attempt to have an intimate relationship. She also demands the freedom to make her own decisions about her life:

The government made SOP to curb COVID-19. You made SOP to control my life? So I won't know what you're up to

behind my back? So you can cover your track, is it? The maid has complained a lot that you touched her...that is sexual harassment...I didn't believe her, I trusted you...when I found out you were having an affair with your secretary... you think I would just keep quiet? If I didn't think about Bella, I would've asked for a divorce. (Loy, 2021, Ep. 9, 33.95-35.57)

The pursuit of modernity gave Malay women the opportunity to have an independent income by working outside the home. Ong (2006) states that this freedom to generate income was soon a matter of enjoyment for Malay women. However, the right to work was seen as a threat to the dominance of male traditions in the economy. A culture of paternalism was fostered in the factories. Women were kept in a secondary position to men and further exploited in terms of low wages. However-so-much skilled, they were kept subservient and dependent on their employers and line managers for work and had to demonstrate obedience and loyalty to the workplace and structural hierarchy. Malay girls were barred from getting permanent jobs with better salaries on the grounds of the damage it would do to masculine morale. The alternative outlet for lively minds was to take up another unhealthy route to independence as *bohsia* [promiscuous girl] (Elias, 2005). Khatty's ability to develop her business independently and generate a lucrative income was considered a threat from an orthodox point of view. Her mother-in-law and husband wanted her to live up to a fantasy construction of the ideal submissive Malay woman—a full-fledged housewife, who dresses modestly and always fulfills her husband's wishes.

The characters of Jannah, Rossa, and Khatty provide three models of the way modernity impacts Malay women's lives. Their roles however do not reproduce the traditional cultural norms attributed to Malay women, but disrupt any illusions of women as subservient and obedient to male dominance. Ultimately our protagonists lose faith in their husband's moral fiber and go their own ways. Jannah and Khatty prove to be strong women in their own right, with much to contribute to both parenting and the workforce, while Rossa falls victim to the myths about the aberrant behavior of widows. All three women, however, show no desire to play at happy families with cheating males. They have their children's welfare at heart but regard the social contract (marriage) as null and void. They stand testimony to change in society. Divorce has come to be regarded as the dignified solution to empty marriage, while respect is not too much to ask for pious women of faith.

***Covid oh Covid!*: Control, family conflict, and togetherness**

Covid oh Covid! (Mokhtar, 2021) is a popular Malay serial drama that revolves around the T20⁸ family during the Covid-19 pandemic phase. This drama series aired on the private broadcasting station TV3 in April 2021 as part of the Lestary slot. *Covid oh Covid!* focuses on the central character, Habsah, a full-time housewife who faces the challenge of managing her family and guiding them through the hardships of the Movement Control Order in the Klang Valley. Habsah not only takes care of her husband and unmarried children but also her mother, who has Alzheimer's. When the pandemic and MCO were enforced, Habsah became extremely cautious and monitored every movement of her family to prevent them from contracting COVID-19. *Covid oh Covid!* is considered significant as it reflects the social conditions, particularly within family institutions, during a time of panic in the country.

Besides Habsah, there are two other important female characters, Kamariah and Salmiah. Kamariah is the mother-in-law of Suhaila, Habsah's daughter, and she holds a more open-minded perspective on family matters and the relationships between mothers and children compared to Habsah, who is seen as quite conservative. Another crucial female character in this drama is Salmiah, Habsah's eldest daughter. The relationship between Habsah and Salmiah becomes complicated after Salmiah decides to stop studying and get married, which angers her mother and leads to her being kicked out of the house. Habsah even restricts communication and relationships between Salmiah, her father, and her other siblings. These three important characters are analyzed based on episodes 9, 11, 12, and 13, which demonstrate that the term 'control' extends beyond complying with the government's orders to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. It also encompasses the dynamics of Malay family relationships, which remain patriarchal, hierarchical, and deeply influenced by Islamic and Malay customs. Furthermore, the role of the mother is emphasized as a moral symbol crucial for the stability of a Malay family institution.

We have argued that the family is a very important moral symbol in the context of Malaysian modernity. This sentiment is echoed throughout East Asian society, particularly Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, which are important models in the discourse of Asian values. So, it is not surprising that serial dramas from most East Asian countries have dominated Malaysian television since the 1980s until today. Tania Modleski (1979) in her classic study of soap opera observes that most of the narrative structures of serial drama focus on the image of the perfect mother who dreams of a united and happy family, and expresses her sadness if it fails to eventuate.

In the serial drama *Covid oh Covid!* the character of Habsah, a T20 housewife (Top 20% of Malaysian households by family income), tries to be a perfect mother in the eyes of her family. She obediently cooks, takes care to appear feminine, cares for her husband and children, and looks after her mother who has Alzheimer's. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 adds to Habsah's burden as a full-time housewife. She becomes obsessed with complying with SOPs to keep the house clean and family members healthy. Under Islamic rule taking care of a family and raising children is a jihad that women must undertake (Stivens, 1994). Failure on the home front reflects badly on family honor.

Habsah bans her son from participating in a video game tournament. She reasons that there would be crowds in attendance, and she is paranoid about the spread of COVID-19:

He can't go, daddy. My son's life is more important than the tournament. No way. Don't just change the law. The tournament sure has many participants. What SOP? If something happens to my son, then you'll have to deal it with me. (Mokhtar, 2021, Ep. 9, 05.91-06.65)

Habsah is stressed by her duty of care to protect the members of her family from disease. She always blames herself first without thinking logically about issues when family matters go wrong. This tendency is evident when Arifin is infected with COVID-19. To viewers of the drama, Habsah's paranoia would not have been new or inexplicable in Malay society. There are no soft options. Warsh (2011) writes that women had to be prepared to sacrifice in health matters, seeking advice and taking steps to ensure that their husbands and children receive the best possible care to fully recover from any illness. Malay women were all too often used as scapegoats by leaders and accused of being "bad" mothers and the root of disaster. Malay women were all too often used as scapegoats by leaders and accused of being "bad" mothers and the root of disaster. Joan-Arnette Parnel (2018) provides an insightful perspective, suggesting that popular culture audiences exhibit a greater interest in representations of difficult or villainous mothers-in-law rather than those portraying good, wise, or angelic figures. This preference could be influenced by factors such as supply and demand dynamics and marketing strategies employed by producers and publishers. Notably, many foreign serial dramas depict the mother-in-law character in negative terms, often in conflict with the son-in-law. This tendency reinforces the negative stereotype associated with mothers-in-law in popular culture including serial television drama. Many foreign serial dramas depict the mother-in-law character in negative terms, often in conflict with the son-in-law. In

Covid oh Covid! Habsah's character is a prototype for a dominant, traditional mother but with the potential to be brought low. However, another mother character in this drama, *Puan* [Madam] Kamariah projects a somewhat different image. She is featured in a modern style, gentle, unveiled, highly educated, and always open-minded. However, what is interesting about Kamariah's character is her adherence to the image of a perfect mother within the framework of Malaysian modernity:

For me, the most important thing is the marriage itself...
and you Suhaila, I want you to be a wife who's obedient
toward your husband and listen to your husband, okay? And
the most important part, you have to be Remy's backbone.
(Mokhtar, 2021, Ep. 11, 10.89-11.22)

Adherence and obedience to customs and Islamic traditions are of paramount significance in Malay family institutions. Kamariah embodies the perfect role model and makes her behavioral expectations clear as a mother-in-law to her daughter-in-law (named Suhailah) as soon as the wedding ceremony is over. Her attitudes reinforce the image of a feminine, domestic, and well-behaved mother (Healey, 1994). However, the conflict between Habsah and her daughter Salmiah explores the loving relationship between a mother and a child who are at odds due to a misunderstanding. Salmiah is Habsah's favorite child. She excels in academics but decides to stop studying and marry her boyfriend. This decision angers Habsah, who drives her daughter out of the house. One of the sons-in-law steps in to calm the situation and tries to mend the relationship between Habsah and Salmiah who have been estranged for a long time during the MCO period. Habsah has suffered and humbly says, "I am really sorry Salmiah because I've been too selfish and I never thought about what you wanted. I should've never treated you like that." (Mokhtar, 2021, Ep. 13, 38.52-38.66)

We believe an era of rapid change in society produces friction between old and new ideas, often resulting in a divisive phenomenon known as the generation gap. Scholars like Dorothy Hobson (2003) suggest that the mother character in the serial drama is particularly important because it shows "the most poignant representations" where the mother loves her children "... whatever their fault" (p. 94). Habsah does not approve of Salmiah's decision to marry the man of her choice. Salmiah is made aware in no uncertain terms of her mother's feelings. However, due to the intervention of her brother-in-law, she eventually realizes that her mother did not see her choice of husband as the problem, but her decision to stop studying and waste the opportunities that a good education brings. As a young mother, Salmiah too realizes her mistake. She is at a loss when she is separated from her

loving family and the cultural and moral support systems at the heart of her existence. She says, poignantly, "...my life isn't perfect if my family is away from me" (Mokhtar, 2021, Ep. 12, 20.11-2017). She (and we as the audience to the drama) are placed in the position of recognizing the good sense of having a united and harmonious family as a core strength on life's journey.

Scholars like Hobson (2003) note however that the gendered text of serial dramas is not merely oriented towards women. The genre also addresses men, reinforcing an ideological narrative of the ideal mother and wife. Motherhood in soap operas is seen as "...a quality which gives women status and unites them, whatever faults they may have or whatever they may do" (Hobson, 2003. pp. 92-93). Stivens (1998b), however, observes that the influence of the Islamic movement complicates the idea of being modern within the unique environment that is Malaysia. Islam resists the influence of the West and the call to modernization, prioritizing the need to preserve family constructs in their traditional form. Habsah, Kamariah, and Salmiah's narratives in the serial drama *Covid oh Covid!* do not dwell on the themes of masculine insufficiencies or gender inequalities in the division of labor. This serial drama prefers to celebrate Malay women protagonists in their traditional role as caring and dedicated mothers, who put the welfare of their families before their own selfish desires and are fundamentally content with their allotted place in a patriarchal society.

Conclusion

This study explores the backbone of a nation-state, made explicit by the way it responds to sudden trauma. The focus is on the female protagonists in two popular television serial dramas—*Hadiah dari Tuhan* [Gift from God] (2020) and *Covid oh Covid!* (2021), as a reflection of the real and agonistic issues facing Malay women under lockdown. The COVID-19 pandemic instilled a profound sense of uncertainty within Malay women, prompting reflections on their identities and the significance of their roles in society. This uncertain environment posed challenges to the prevailing expectations of obedience and control imposed by the Malay patriarchal framework. During the pandemic, Malay women grappled with questions regarding their individual and collective identities, questioning the traditional notions of submission and conformity that were ingrained within the cultural fabric. The disruption caused by the pandemic provided an opportunity for introspection and re-evaluation of the societal expectations placed upon them.

Malay women were continuously jostled between public and private expectations. The nation-state was fixated on one hand to fast-track modernity and called women into the workforce. On the other hand, women

were pressured into holding the fort on the domestic front. Stabilizing daily routines were disrupted. Families' members, in close confinement, showed signs of stress and relationships suffered. The moral structure of Malay society—cultural and religious—requires women to be obedient to their husband's orders and faithfully carry out their roles as mothers and household managers. The increased burden of caring during the pandemic brought many women to a physical and mental breakdown. Government authorities chose to ignore the danger signs and policies and directives during the Movement Control Order (MCO) were perceived as insensitive and sexist, largely oppressing women and girls. There was a rise in domestic violence and to add insult to injury women were often blamed for not measuring up to impossible standards.

Foertsch (2001) argues that there is still a plague of fears to be nurtured in society, foreshadowing not only the dangers of further epidemic infections but also warning against other deep-rooted “wounds” in society. The continued popularity of “disease narratives” in social media and serial dramas suggests an underlying malaise in Malay society, particularly among neglected women. And the trust between people and government may be severely tested in times of national crises. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), predicts the COVID-19 health crisis will continue to haunt national development and public health in Malaysia in the foreseeable future and cautions the government to pay attention to all forms of violence and discrimination against women (“Commentary on Malaysia’s women and girls, MCO 3.0 and Covid-19 vaccine rollout—UNFPA,” 2021).

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Endnotes

¹ *Melayu Baru*, also known as “new Malay,” is a term coined by the former Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohammad, to describe his vision of cultivating an educated middle class of Malays who would spearhead the nation’s modernization.

² Islam *Hadhari*, introduced by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdullah Badawi, was envisioned as a framework of ideas and plans aimed at fostering a modern Islamic country in Malaysia.

³ *1Malaysia* was a concept introduced by Najib Razak, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia. It aimed to promote national unity and harmony among the diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia.

⁴ Vision 2020 was a long-term development plan for Malaysia introduced by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. The vision aimed to transform Malaysia into a fully developed country by the year 2020.

⁵ The New Economic Policy (NEP) was a policy implemented in Malaysia in 1971 with the objective of addressing economic disparities and reducing poverty among different ethnic groups, particularly the Malay majority. The objective of the NEP was not just to modernise the economy, but also to create a new generation of middle-class Malays who were to have the education and skills to participate in this new economy.

⁶ *Minah Karan* [factory girls], a popular term used to describe Malay girls employed in electronics factories.

⁷ *Bohsia* refers to a Malay girl who engages in activities such as casual sex, nightclub visits, and running away from home. Her rebellious behavior has caused moral panic and social anxiety.

⁸ T20, In Malaysia, a household is classified as T20 if it is among the top 20% of earners in the country.

⁹ Global Al Ikhwan was established in 2013 as the corporate wing of the Al Ikhwan group. Its main objective is to strengthen the socio-economic status of Muslims in Malaysia.

Grant Support Details

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, MAMS and CR; methodology, MAMS, CR, and RIS; investigation, MAMS, RIS, and MZZA; data curation, MAMS, RIS, CR, and MZZA; writing—original draft preparation, MAMS and CR; writing—review and editing, MAMS, RIS and CR; MAMS, MZZA, and RIS; project administration, MAMS, RIS, and MZZA. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The authors received no specific funding for this work.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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