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Push!: Exploring The Myth of Childbirth in Malay Films

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ABSTRACT

Childbirth is a universal and natural global experience, however, its representation in films specifically, and popular culture in general, is framed within stereotypical images that are brimming over with inaccuracy and myth. In the West, gynae-narratives in films are often studied by using feminist psychoanalysis, particularly on the gynae-horror narrative. This study, explores the varied representations of childbirth in some selected Malay films - such as the labouring body - to identify and make sense of why the experience of childbirth in films becomes rather problematic, asking the question of what myth is being perpetuated by such representations. Using a close textual analysis of some Malay films that are purposively selected, the study employs Roland Barthes' Myth and its link to ideology as a critical framework, paying attention to Malay cultural signs to create meanings and expose the ideological motives of such representation. This study is crucial for it is able to illuminate the myth-making process of childbirth in Malay films and the effects this myth might have on the society's view of the experience of childbirth, and perhaps putting into microscope our cultural perceptions of marriage, motherhood, womanhood, the female body and the family.

Keywords: *Barthes, representation, female body, gynae-horror, the family.*

INTRODUCTION

In a memorable episode of the iconic 90s sitcom, *Friends* (season 8, episode 15), Chandler's Valentine's Day takes an unexpected turn when he stumbles upon a birthing video he mistakenly believes to be an intimate gift from his wife, Monica. The shockwaves of what he witnessed reverberate through his words as he attempts to convey the trauma:

> Chandler: Remember the first time you saw *Jaws*? How long it took to go back in the water?
> Monica: We can't let this tape wreck Valentine's day.
> Chandler: You don't know. You didn't see it.
> Monica: Childbirth is a natural thing. It's beautiful.
> Chandler: (Sarcastically) Beautiful. Really? You think this is beautiful (then picks up the remote and starts the video with a woman's voice "pushing").
> Monica: (In shock). Oh my God! No wonder my mother hates me.

When Rachel, another *Friends*' character who is pregnant, comes over to watch the "miracle of birth" video, Chandler succinctly warns her.

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> Chandler: Before you watch it. Don't watch it.
> Rachel: Well you saw it? Was it scary?
> Chandler: Well, let's just say it is ironic how footages of someone being born can make you want to kill yourself.

As *Friends* is a situation comedy, it regales the audience with comedic moments and the scene is accompanied by the audience's laughter. Chandler's use of the film *Jaws* as an analogy paints a vivid picture of what happened to some people who went to watch the film in the 1970s. At the same time, importantly, the scene captures both popular cultural response to and the imagination of childbirth.

As an important popular culture product, films have the extraordinary power to capture the essence of life's most profound moments, and childbirth is no exception. As argued by Withers et al. (2018), "[...]while childbirth is a biological event, the pregnancy and birth experiences surrounding it are mostly social constructs, shaped by cultural perceptions and practices". Therefore, films bring some cultural perceptions of childbirth, and inevitably affect the way imagery of childbirth is represented and consumed. Typically, the representation of childbirth in cinema is informed by generic formulations. On one hand, for example in the romantic comedy genre like *Father of the Bride Part 2* (1995), the representation often serves as a visceral and transformative narrative device, allowing audiences to witness raw beauty and intensity of bringing a new life into the world. On the other hand, the horror genre, for example in films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), portrays the dark side of childbirth by associating it with paranoia and the monster figure. These cinematic renditions not only reflect the psychological realities of labour but also delve into the emotional and psychological dimensions, enriching our collective understanding of this pivotal life event. In effect, from the intimate portrayal of a mother's struggle and triumph to the poignant exploration of the emotion coursing through the delivery room, films offer a window into an experience that is both universal and deeply personal. Directors and cinematographers deftly navigate the delicate balance between realism and artistry, immersing viewers in the visceral journey of childbirth.

Furthermore, the representation of childbirth in film has evolved over time, mirroring societal shifts in perspectives on motherhood and reproductive rights. Early cinematic portrayals often glossed over the visceral of childbirth, opting for sanitized, almost romanticized scenes especially with the use of euphemisms like "expecting" and "with child" (Oliver, 2013). This is often due more to the censorship requirement, and less with the creative choice. However, contemporary filmmakers are increasingly embracing a more authentic approach, cashing on the messy, painful, and ultimately triumphant aspects of the birthing process. The shift in representation mirrors a broader cultural acknowledgement of the complexities and challenges faced by expectant mothers. By showcasing the diverse range of childbirth experiences, from home births to hospital deliveries, films contribute to a more inclusive and empathetic dialogue surrounding reproductive health. In doing so, they dismantle stereotypes and empower women to take ownership of their birthing experience.

Childbirth, a profound and universal human experience, finds itself embedded in the global tapestry of life. However, its portrayal in cinema, and by extension, popular culture, has often been ensnared in a web of stereotypes, dripping with inaccuracy and myth. While the gynae-narratives of Western cinema have been subjected to meticulous scrutiny through the lens of feminist theories such as second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s whose

slogan is "the personal is political", which "transform[s] female bodily experiences into weapons of rebellion and social controversy" (Cortes Vieco, 2021) to psychoanalysis (for example the analysis of the horror genre) to postcolonial feminism, this study takes a different route. In other words, the present study acknowledges and therefore eschews the conflicting ideological positions with regards to pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood from different feminist perspectives, notably from Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* to postcolonial feminisms, or the third wave, that according to Mookherjee, "have heightened appreciation of differences among women" (2017). This is because the veritable differences in feminist perspectives will hinder the analysis of the myth surrounding childbirth itself. There is no denying that the analysis of childbirth in film requires an understanding of feminist theories, we believe that the knowledge, at this exploratory level, merely helps to situate our interpretation within a larger context, but it does not dictate our readings of the films.

By delving into the diverse depictions of childbirth in select Malay films, this article casts a discerning eye on the labouring body, unravelling the complexities that render the cinematic rendition of this pivotal event a subject of contention. This article raises a crucial inquiry: what prevailing myths are woven into the fabric of Malay culture through these representations? We hope that as an exploration, this article will be able to uncover layers of meaning and challenge preconceived notions, offering a fresh perspective on a topic of paramount importance – the representation and its myth of childbirth in films.

CHILDBIRTH IN FILMS

The portrayal of childbirth in films has evolved over time. In early films, childbirth scenes were often implied rather than shown explicitly, and were generally romanticized and idealised. For example, in classical Hollywood films from the 1930s and 1940s, childbirth scenes were typically portrayed as highly sanitised, with the mother looking serene and beautiful, and the baby being born clean and quiet (Oliver, 2013). This could partly be due to the Hays Production Code at that time and coupled with the film stars' squeaky-clean reputation, like Doris Day (Oliver, 2013). Oliver's work is crucial as it "[...]trace[s] images of pregnant bodies from the 1930s and 1940s Hollywood films" and the representation is informed by feminism and feminist theory (p. 241). This sanitised image seems to change in the following decades. In the 1950s and 1960s, with the rise and socially conscious filmmaking, childbirth scenes began to be depicted more realistically, with more graphic and explicit details. This trend continued in the 1970s and 1980s, with films like *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Alien* (1979), featuring intense and graphic birth scenes. These two films are example of horror film genres. Horror and sci-fi horror respectively, play an important role in the way the narrative about childbirth is shaped by these films. This prompts Harrington (2018, p.3) to coin the term gynae horror to refer to "all aspects of female reproductive horror, from the reproductive and sexual organs, to virginity and first sex, through to pregnancy, birth and motherhood, and finally to menopause and post-menopause".

Cinema often depicts women's reproductive ability as a form of social criticism. Cortes Vieco argues that since the 1960s and 1970s, the birthing body helps to divide "feminism into two antagonistic factions at war: anti-motherhood feminism and maternal feminism" (2021, p. 218). For example, in East and West German cinema, Creech argues that films are often used as a political apparatus and that the mothering figure provides a criticism of socialist value system (2016). This according to her, "reflects feminist resistance to a patriarchal society structured around progress, productivity and rationalism" (2016, p.92). This shows

that cinema in the West is gradually informed by gender politics and that the representation of women and their reproductive ability is seen as oppressive. However, Roberts and De Benedictis (2021) argue that there has been limited exploration into how media influences childbirth experiences.

Informed by feminism (theory and movement), the representation of childbirth in popular culture has brought back the focus of childbirth from the "medical procedure" to women's own experiences. The centralisation of woman's experience of childbirth, as Reed (2021, p. 9) argues:

> Childbirth is a rite of passage *and* (original italic) an experience that is shaped by 'rites of passage' and 'rites of protection'. Rites of passage is the category of rituals (words and actions) that guide and support a woman during her journey. These rites of passage mirror the transformation a woman makes while also transmitting messages about what is expected following her transition into the role of the mother. Rites of protection are category of rituals carried out in an attempt to protect the woman and baby from harm during childbirth rite of passage.

Within Western cinema, the representation of women and childbirth is often laced with the development of feminist politics and the evolving gender dynamics. The birthing body becomes a site of contestation in which new meanings and understanding about women empowerment and gender equality are made. In the Malaysian context, studies on the female characters in the horror genre tries to unpack issues of women and representation albeit with western feminist theories. In a study done by Izharuddin (2019, p. 2), she looks at the *Pontianak* character, naming the figure as a "monstrous maternal", as she died during childbirth. Therefore, women and the birthing body often represent something else, and "that something else" is apart from the women's body itself, modulating women's childbirth experience into an ideological tool for the resistance of the entrenched dominion of patriarchal order. Here, the female form transcends its physicality, morphing into a potent symbol that resonates far beyond its corporeal existence. Therefore, it is significant to investigate the representation of childbirth in Malay cinema in order to understand its own ideological motif concerning childbirth and the birthing body by applying Roland Barthes' concept of myth.

CHILDBIRTH IN MALAY CULTURE

There is a preponderance of research on childbirth in Malaysia. Much of this research focuses on health, social and anthropological issues, leaving a huge void in the study of the representation of childbirth in the media, particularly films. This review of past studies is crucial in establishing the significance of this study. This section reviews some past studies related to childbirth in Malay culture and then in Malay cinema.

The most comprehensive studies on childbirth and the Malay culture centred on health issues, including the mother's experience after childbirth. Wilson's (1973) study used participant observation technique to understand the taboo related to mothers' during confinement. Wilson's subject of investigation was fifty Malay women in a fishing village, whose diet, as she discovered was altered abruptly after childbirth, which lowered the nutrient levels of the food. Malay's belief in a restricted diet defined by "hot" and "cold" after childbirth in Wilson's study was also the concern of a study by Laderman (1987), that focused

on humoral patterns during the postpartum period. Laderman concluded that the Malay fertility theory equates "cold" with fertility and "hot" with sterility, and this theory could be traced in the spiritual beliefs of the Malays and has affected how a pregnant woman is to be treated. Meanwhile, Myint et al. (2019) focus on the postpartum period in their study, highlighting the idea that the traditional practices can have value on a new mother. Indeed, Kartini Aboo Talib@Khalid and Nurshuhada Muhammed (2020) revisit the issue of traditional medicine from the ethnoscience perspective and discover that there is an integration of traditional medicine into modern treatment of childbirth. This resonates well with Fitrianti's (2021) research that focuses on Malaysian women living in the United Kingdom, revealing that these Malay women still seek traditional postnatal treatment despite living in a modern country. In short, these studies highlight the concern for a mother's health after childbirth.

The theme of health in childbirth is carried to the new millennial with the emphasis on comparing cultural and modern practices. Some studies, such as Ali (2007), Naser (2015), and Al-Attas (2019), compares the need for traditional birth attendant or *Bidan Kampung* in Malay culture vis-à-vis western attendant, arguing for the need for both during pregnancy and after childbirth. However, Al-Attas, for example, uses phenomenological approach to understand the Malay cultural practices of postpartum confinement, or *berpantang,* among urban mothers to argue that these mothers view traditional medicine and practices as inferior to their western counterparts, and this includes eliminating the need for a traditional birth attendant. The view that traditional practices as inferior reduces the practice into familial responsibilty, severing it from the medical discourse; thus, marking the shift from a biological dimension to childbirth as a social construction.

The severance from the medical discourse to the beginning of understanding childbirth experiences as a social construct opened up new ways of making sense of childbirth in Malay culture. Although medical discourse is central to Manderson's work (1998), instead of locating it at the corporeal level, it is now treated as a metaphor, in this case, it is also associated with a modernist project. Manderson analyses the effort to modernise the Malay mother, arguing that the narrative of maternity is intricately woven with the interplay of motherhood ideologies, imperial influences and medical perspectives. Manderson's work places the emphasis on Malay maternity, driven by unfavourable perceptions of Malay village life and surroundings. Meanwhile, in the same vein, Stivens (1998, p. 63), in her research on middle-class Malay women, argues that these women are trapped within the maxim that: "To be a modern mother is to be an active consumer under great pressure to acquire all commodities necessary for the satisfactory performance of motherhood". In contrast, the theme of modernity is also discussed by Lubis et al. (2020), focusing on the representation of Islamic women in Malay and Persian short stories. They found that these women are represented as steadfast, which can inspire the readers.

There is a dearth of studies of the representation of childbirth in Malay cinema. The limited existing past studies on childbirth in Malay cinema have been focusing on the horror genre, paying particular attention to the representation of women as monsters. Such studies by Galt (2021), Izharuddin (2019), and Asaari and Aziz (2017) are emblematic of the fascination with subverting masculine reading of the female body and her bodily experiences at childbirth. Unlike Lubis et al.'s study (2020) that reveals women's innate power and strength as ordinary women, studies done by Galt (2021), Izharuddin (2019), and Asaari and Aziz (2017) explore how women's power is often projected on a monster and horror figure especially as their research pivots on the horror genre. Therefore, the present study is

significant as it explores the myth of childbirth in another film genre, that is, the historical film genre.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a close textual analysis of the films as its main method. As an exploration, two Malaysian films are chosen to analyse the myth surrounding childbirth perpetuated by film narratives. The two films are of the historical genres, that is, a film based on a historical figure. The films are chosen as they have important female characters who are pregnant. The two films are *Sultan Mahmud Mangkat Di Julang* (1961) and *Mat Kilau* (2022).

ROLAND BARTHES' MYTH AND CHILDBIRTH

Barthes' myth theory provides a unique lens through which to examine the cultural representation of childbirth in the media. This framework seeks to deconstruct the narratives surrounding childbirth, revealing the underlying ideological structures and symbolic meanings embedded within them. Barthes contends that myths are constructed through the process of "signification", where everyday objects or concepts are imbued with broader cultural meanings (1972,). Applying this theory to childbirth allows for a critical examination of how societal norms, beliefs, and power dynamics shape the representation of this transformative event.

Barthes posits that myths function as a mode of signification, where complex ideas and values are condensed into simplified, easily communicable forms (ffrench, 2021). In the context of childbirth, this framework allows to identify the underlying cultural messages conveyed through visual and narrative elements. For example, the imagery of serene, pain-free childbirth experience may mythologise the notion of an idealised motherhood, reinforcing societal expectations and ideals surrounding maternal behaviour.

In addition, examining childbirth and its narrative through Barthes' myth enables an analysis of the ideological implications embedded with representations. Incorporating film analysis into the examination of gynae-narratives through Barthes' myth deepens the understanding of the ideological implications within representations. Films serve as a potent medium for mythmaking, as they combine visual and narrative elements to convey complex cultural messages. Indeed, it can be said that myths surrounding childbirth often reflect broader societal beliefs about gender roles and female agency. By unpacking these myths, we can uncover the ideological underpinnings that influence societal perceptions and practices related to childbirth, especially in the way female experience is represented.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The films to be analysed in this article are of the historical genre. Two films selected are *Mat Kilau* (2022) and *Sultan Mahmud Mangkat Di Julang* (1961). Both films are selected because they contain two important pregnant characters. For this article, the first film to be analysed is *Mat Kilau* (2022) and then we move to *Sultan Mahmud Mangkat Di Julang* (1961). The decision to use this structure for our analysis and discussion is informed by two criteria: Firstly, both films are based on a historical figure, and their temporal settings are relatively similar; Secondly, the pregnant woman character in *Mat Kilau* is not the main character although it is an important character, which means, less focus is given to her. The purpose of the analysis is to explore the myth surrounding childbirth in Malay films, arguing that although these female characters' experiences of childbirth are laden with sacrifices, vulnerability and

a sense of duty, their characters emanate a resounding maternal power; thus illuminating the enduring strength of their instincts in the face of adversity.

In *Mat Kilau* (2022), Rokiah, the valiant wife of Wahid, a steadfast companion of Mat Kilau, emerges as a character of profound depth. Despite the fact she is not the main female character, she is shown as a portrait of loyalty, tenderness and solitude. Bearing the weight of the impending motherhood, she seeks solace in her husband's love and presence. Even amidst the throes of pregnancy, the film unveils her unwavering commitment to her role as a devoted wife; a poignant scene paints her preparing a meal, an act of love, for both of them. Her heartfelt invitation to dine together, however, is met with Wahid's regretful decline, as he prepares himself to go to Tok Gajah's house. The scene is consciously orchestrated, providing a juxtaposition of Rokiah's pregnancy and her characterisation, hence, thrusting her into the cinematic spotlight. Barthes' concept of myth emphasises how these visual and narrative elements serve to convey and reinforce cultural norms and values, in which pregnant women are expected to take it easy and follow the cultural ritual of restraint.

In the same scene, Rokiah is masterfully placed in the middle shot. This scene is significant because it shows Rokiah's countenance that betrays her disquiet, a silent disapproval of her husband's frequent meeting with Mat Kilau, although she realises that these men wage a formidable battle against the British colonial power. Indeed, she beseeches her husband, acutely aware that the precipice of childbirth is imminent, imploring him to stand by her side. For us, the scene unfurls with a visual dynamic: Rokiah, seated with a visage etched in sorrow, while her husband paces around the room, symbolising the power struggle that simmers beneath the surface. This is highlighted by their conversation that is not merely about marital duty, but a reckoning of responsibility in the face of impending childbirth:

> Rokiah: *Abang jangan lupa tanggungjawab abang*.
> (Do not forget your responsibility as a husband).
> Wahid: *Cukup Kiah, awak tu jangan lupa tanggungjawab awak itu, taat pada suami*.
> (Enough Kiah. You should not forget your responsibility, you must be obedient to your husband).

Conversely, his apprehension transcends the immediate as he is more worried about what will happen to his future generation if the British continue to rule and oppress the people than the needs of his pregnant wife. Therefore, our first encounter with Rokiah and her husband sets a stage in which the exploration of duty, sacrifice and the crucible of nationhood can be understood, in our effort to understand the myth surrounding childbirth in this film.

The second scene involving the married couple also takes place in their private space. In the scene, Rokiah is shown as standing alone, with chiaroscuro lighting that accentuates her pregnancy, a testament to the weight of her worry. Then Wahid walks into the house, not realising that Rokiah is standing nearby. Her image is blurred, creating both a sense of depth of the space and a sense that she has become an apparition-like figure. When her character is in focus, her urgent plea breaks the silence as she recounts the British atrocities at the market and his perilous involvement. A poignant exchange follows:

> Wahid: *Awak tak payah risau, tahu lah saya jaga diri. Kenapa belum tidur lagi? Kesian anak kita dalam perut*
> (You don't need to worry; I know how to take care of myself. Why aren't you in bed yet? Pity our unborn child)

Then, Rokiah's resolve strengthens, her impassioned entreaty urging him to refrain from the treacherous path laid before them. The ultimatum hangs heavy in the air, with Mat Kilau's name a dividing line. On hearing that, her husband approaches her, his lamentation reverberates, a clash of ideologies and responsibilities:

> Wahid: *Sebab pemikiran seperti awak ini lah ramai orang kita dipijak-pijak bangsa asing. Awak bagitahu saya, apa saya nak jawab di sana nanti (akhirat) kalau saya tak buat apa? Bagaimana dengan tanggungjawap saya? Bagaimana tanggungjawab awak sebagai sebagai seorang muslim? Biarkan sahaja saudara seagama kita ditindas. Macam tu ke?*
> (Because of your kind of thinking that many of our people are oppressed by foreigners. Tell me, what should I answer on the day of judgment if I am not doing anything. Where is my responsibility, your responsibility as a *muslim*? Do you want to let our fellow *muslims* to be oppressed?)

The reaction shot reveals her distress at her husband's response, as she expresses her heartfelt plea:

> Rokiah: *Sebab saya tak nak abang mati. Kiah masih perlukan abang, jangan hancurkan harapan Kiah. Kalau abang nak teruskan, abang tinggalkan Kiah. Kiah lagi sanggup hidup sorang daripada ada suami macam abang*
> (Because I don't want you to die. I still need you, don't disappoint me. If you want to continue, you better leave me. I prefer to live alone to being married to you)

The conversation escalates into tension, and Rokiah indirectly requests for a separation. She lays bare her fears, willing him to choose a different path. His eventual declaration that he loves his nation more than his own wife makes her cry. He walks away from her, and in the moment of clarity, he stops and expresses his hope that she would understand and continue to be his guiding light.

As the story further unfolds and in a heart-wrenching climax, the British launch a vengeful assault on Rokiah's home. Rokiah is attacked by the British while working in her kitchen. She falls down, and hurts her stomach. As the chaos unfolds, the camera deftly weaves between the desperate rush of Wahid and Mat Kilau, racing to her aid. Rokiah is forced by the British to walk outside her house and is kicked by one of the officers. She falls on her pregnant tummy, shouting in agony. When she is kicked in her tummy and lying down on the ground, Rokiah's defiant spirit shines through even in the face of excruciating pain. With an unwavering determination, she declares: *"Kau cincang aku walau macamana aku tak akan buka mulut* - I won't open my mouth even if you cut me into pieces". The camera shifts to her leg, showing blood running down, which functions as a stark symbol of the tragic turn of events, culminating in her heart-wrenching miscarriage. Upon hearing her insistence, an Indonesian warrior who works with the British callously presses his foot against Rokiah's

wounded tummy before stabbing her with his sword. When Wahid and Mat Kilau arrive at the scene, Mat Kilau stops Wahid from moving forward and covers his mouth so Wahid does not make any noise. The camera then cuts to her body lying on the ground and back to an extreme close up of Wahid's agonising eyes, painting a vivid tableau of Rokiah's fallen form. After the British army has left, the camera pans towards Rokiah's hand that is covered with blood and shows Wahid running towards Rokiah who is still alive. The camera provides a close up of her face, while she whispers:

> Rokiah: *Bang jangan lupa Kiah nanti dalam perjuangan. Kiah ingat abang tau. Ingat Kiah sentiasa dengan abang. Selamatkan bumi Melayu kita, bang*
> (Please remember me in your fight. I always remember you. Remember I will always be with you. Save our Malay world)

The reaction shot of Wahid trying to hold his tears and that of a closing up shot of Rokiah breathing her last breath provides a juxtaposition in terms of how both of them are fighting in their own ways. The fact that she is a victim of revenge epitomises the collateral damage caused by colonialism. This haunting moment encapsulates the indomitable of a woman's sacrifice in the face of unspeakable adversity.

It can then be said that the portrayal of Rokiah as a heavily pregnant wife serves as a poignant exploration of the intersection between childbirth and myth. Rokiah, though not the central character, emerges as a figure of profound depth and emotional resonance. Her unwavering commitment to her role as a devoted wife, even in the face of impending motherhood, is a testament to the pervasive myth of sacrifice and duty that surrounds childbirth. Her character development epitomises the complexity of a woman's experience during the film's pivotal moment.

In effect, the tension surrounding the conversation between Rokiah and Wahid transcends mere marital duty and amplifies the myth of childbirth as a crucible of nationhood, where individual choices resonate with broader implications for the Malay's struggle for independence. Rokiah's devastating and tragic fate exposes the harsh realities and potential risks that women may face during childbirth. Indeed, Rokiah's defiant declaration, even in the face of unspeakable pain, challenges the myth of womanhood as inherently fragile and instead portrays childbirth as an experience marked by strength and agency. The brutal scene exemplifies how the myth of childbirth encompasses both triumph and tragedy, urging us to pay more attention to the nuances of the universal phenomenon, that is, childbirth.

In *Sultan Mahmud Mangkat Dijulang* (henceforth *Sultan*), the poignant narrative unfolds with the wife of Lakshmana Bentan, Cik Wan Anum, grappling with the complexities of impending motherhood while her husband embarks on a perilous mission against pirates, at the behest of Sultan Mahmud. She is heavily pregnant when the Lakshmana (a.k.a Megat Seri Rama) was assigned by eponymous Sultan Mahmud to fight the pirates. Her heartfelt plea for him to delay the departure until after she gives birth encapsulates a profound sense of vulnerability and longing: "*Tidak bolehkah kekanda bertempuh sehingga perahu dinda yang sarat ini berlabuh dulu kanda*? Can you not wait until I have given birth?". Yet, duty to the nation, according to her beloved husband, takes precedence, leaving her in the Sultan's care. The husband's commitment is a juxtaposition of personal and national interest. She tells him that she doesn't feel good about it. Her husband asks for her permission to leave, requesting her to pray for him. Her final farewells were in a Malay pantun:

"Pergi Puan Pergi Chendana,
Intan Baiduri dua pekan
Pergi tuan pergi nyawa
Jagalah diri baik baik"

The Malay pantun she recites during their farewell imbues the scene with a poetic resonance, evoking a deeper emotional connection.

As the story unfurls, the focus shifts to Wan Anum's resilience and well-being in her husband's absence. Upon knowing that Wan Anum's husband was away, Datuk Tun Teja Ali – a palace official – attempts to violate her sanctity. However, she valiantly defends herself by using a *keris/* a Malay dagger, asserting her agency in the face of adversity. This sends him scurrying down the stairs. In the following scene, set in her backyard garden, unfolds a metaphorical tableau of her journey. The discovery of a rotten jackfruit, a symbol of unfulfilled cravings, mirrors her own yearning for stability and wholeness that she hopes her pregnancy would bring to her family.

Her quest for a fresh jackfruit becomes a poignant manifestation of her pregnancy cravings, becomes a poignant metaphor for her desire for sustenance and fulfilment in trying times. She asks Awang, her helper to help find a jackfruit as she is craving for it. Awang embarks on a fruitless search around the Kampung, mirroring the challenges faced in her own pursuit of solace. In a fortuitous turn of event, a village chief or *penghulu*, carrying a jackfruit meant for the sultan as the latter has planted it, crosses her path. Her earnest plea for a portion of the fruit, driven by her belief that her unborn child craves it, underscores her innate connection to motherhood. The initial refusal, due its royal ownership, and subsequent reluctant consent of the *penghulu*, shrouded in secrecy, symbolize the delicate negotiations of power and vulnerability that define her journey as a pregnant woman.

In a cinematic crescendo, the jackfruit arrives at the palace, heralding a fateful turn of events. The Sultan, animated with pride, anticipates savouring the fruit from the very tree he nurtured. However, his elation quickly sours to indignation as he discovers the fruit's untimely incision. For him, this act symbolises the gravest of transgression -betrayal of loyalty as he should not eat the leftover of his subject, an affront to the sanctity of his rule of the Malay sultanate. The act is considered insulting to the Malay sultan and punishable by death. He orders the penghulu to be beheaded.

As the sultan issues a decree of death, the film deftly intercuts this sombre tribunal with the relentless battle waged by the Lakshmana against the marauding pirates. The scene is then immediately followed by Wan Anum being brought to see the sultan. The juxtaposition of these parallel narratives heightens the stakes, weaving a tapestry of tension and impending doom. In a pivotal moment, Wan Anum confronts the Sultan, her plea laden with the weight of her unborn cravings:

> Wan Anum: *Ampun tuanku, sebenarnya batik mengidam, tuanku*
> (Pardon me dear Sultan, actually I am craving)
> {…}
> *Bukan patik yang mengkehendakkan Nangka itu, tuanku, tetapi harus anak yang beta kandung ini yang menyebabkan patik ingin memakan Nangka itu*
> (It is not me who is wanting the jackfruit, it is the baby that I am carrying that makes me crave for it)

Sultan: *Cis! Berani kau memperbodohkan beta ya*?
(How dare you try to fool me!)

The ensuing sequence, a harrowing tableau of life and death, unfolds with masterful precision. The Sultan orders for her stomach to be cut open. She is tied to a bed – while other palace advisors asking the Sultan to forgive her.

As she is appealing for her dear life, the camera assumes a vantage directly above Wan Anum, her gravid belly bearing silent witness to her impending fate. A close-up frames her tear-streaked face, a canvas of raw emotions, as she continues pleading for the sultan's mercy. As Tun Teja Ali, who is vengeful of her rejection of his initial sexual advancement, acts by the order of the sultan, the camera plunges into the heart of the visceral struggle, choreographing a montage of agony and despair. Jump cut shots oscillate between the sultan's enraged visage, Tun Teja's grim task, and Wan Anum's anguished cries. The rapid-fire succession of images imbues the scene with an electric urgency, a heartbeat of dread that pulses through the narrative.

Remarkably, the film navigates this crucible of suffering with a deft hand, eschewing gratuitous gore in favour of visceral emotion. The absence of explicit violence paradoxically amplifies the scene's impact, allowing the audience to confront the profound human drama at its core. The scene's suspense and poignancy will leave an indelible imprint on the viewer's psyche. This is achieved when Tun Teja Ali raises the fetus, declaring that the jackfruit is there. This impact is crucial to the narrative as a way of juxtaposing Lakshmana Bentan's eventual revenge and murder of the eponymous Sultan.

The analysis of Sultan Mahmud illuminates a potent myth about pregnancy and childbirth – a myth intricately woven into the fabric of duty, sacrifice and vulnerability in Malay culture. Wan Anum's poignant plea for her husband to delay his departure due to her pregnancy embodies the profound tension between personal longing and national duty, painting a portrait of a woman navigating the complexities of impending motherhood in the midst of perilous circumstances. This myth unravels further as Wan Anum confronts the adversity in her husband's absence, ultimately asserting her agency in the face of violation.

The myth gains further depth as Wan Anum's visceral plea for the jackfruit is met with defiance and secrecy. This delicate negotiation of power and vulnerability encapsulates the intricate dance between maternal instincts and external forces. In effect, in this myth about childbirth, intertwined threads of duty, sacrifice and vulnerability converge to a narrative that transcends the confines of its cinematic portrayal. The heavily pregnant Wan Anum emerges as a poignant emblem of the strength and resilience inherent in the act of childbirth, underscoring the enduring power of the maternal experience amidst a backdrop of adversity and sacrifice, thus debunking the myth that the rituals surrounding childbirth in Malay culture as ineffective and laden with patriarchal ideologies.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the films *Mat Kilau* and *Sultan Mahmud Mangkat Di Julang* provides a compelling exploration of the myth surrounding childbirth in Malay culture. Through the characters of Rokiah and Wan Anum, both heavily pregnant women facing tumultuous circumstances, the films delve into the complexities of duty, sacrifice and vulnerability. These themes are deeply intertwined with the experience of impending motherhood, painting a vivid portrait of the myth surrounding childbirth. Both characters emerge as a character of

profound depth. In Rokiah's case, her poignant interaction with her husband reveals a power struggle between personal responsibility and the broader duty to the nation. This juxtaposition highlights the intricate interplay of duty and sacrifice, a central myth surrounding childbirth in Malay culture. In a similar vein, Wan Anum's plea for her husband to delay serving the country due to her pregnancy encapsulates the tension between personal longing and national duty, illuminating a potent myth about pregnancy and childbirth.

In short, the films' portrayal of pregnant women and childbirth, sheds light on the enduring myth surrounding childbirth in Malay culture. The intersection of duty, sacrifice, and vulnerability within the context of impending motherhood provides a poignant commentary on the complexities and nuances of this universal experience. This revelation, has to be said, can be due to the specificity and nuances of the historical genre that defines both films. This finding contributes to the body of knowledge about the birthing mother in Malay cinema, as it alludes to research done by Lubis et al. (2020) that shows these women as steadfast and inspirational. It also alludes to the idea that this representation is the result of generic nuances, as epitomized by the study done by Galt (2021), Izharuddin (2019), and Asaari and Aziz (2017), whose focus is on the horror genre. Through meticulous cinematography that takes into account Malay sensitivities, the two films unravel the layers of this myth, challenging preconceived notions about childbirth rituals and the role of birthing women in Malay culture. By engaging with Roland Barthes' concept of myth, this paper underscores how the two selected films serve as powerful vehicles for examining and deconstructing the prevailing narrative surrounding childbirth in Malay cinema.

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