

# The Negotiation between the Predominated Sacredness and Secular Popular Culture in Brunei Darussalam

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## Abstract

In retrospectives on Brunei's first feature film *Gema Dari Menara* (1968), commentators have tended to focus on either its historical representation of Brunei's booming post-curfew years in the late 1960s as 'a time capsule of Brunei's lost pop history', or the film's propagandistic nature for *Da'wah* (religious propagation). In this paper, however, I will concentrate my observations on the aesthetic values of the film itself, including the narrative structure, plot design, camerawork, characterisation and character relationships, as well as the resulting artistic effects manifested by these production elements as a whole.

Putting all the propagandistic elements aside, I would like to argue that *Gema Dari Menara*, as a family melodrama, is carefully constructed and propelled by the above-mentioned filmmaking techniques. The drama not only tells the story of an intense familial conflict revolving around the theme of faith rooted in the Bruneian tradition, it also implies the necessity of an internal negotiation between the predominant Islamic ideology and the increasingly secularised Bruneian civil society at the time. While the implied negotiation may have been unintended or subconscious in the original making of the film, it is well-balanced and reflective of the political and social reality of Brunei as a British Protectorate in the late 1960s, foreshadowing the current coexistent status quo of the dominance and sacredness of MIB and the secular popular culture in Brunei.

## Introduction

In a retrospective on Brunei's first feature film *Gema Dari Menara* (1968), media artist Mervin Espina, a Filipino who grew up in Brunei, commented: 'To put it bluntly, *Gema Dari Menara* is not a very good film at all, but is nonetheless a time capsule of Brunei's lost pop history' (2013, p. 70). Based on his personal interviews of the local audiences who were eyewitnesses of the film's screenings in 1968 and 1969, Espina (2013) claimed that the screenings of the film 'were well-attended. All were excited to see their relatives and friends — and friends of friends — in the film, and Brunei's first attempt at feature film production' (p. 67). Fifty years later, during the film's golden jubilee celebration, the weeklong re-screenings of the newly digitized *Gema Dari Menara*'s at White Screen Cinema were unsurprisingly sold out via 'pre-purchased tickets without any promotion[al] effort' (Chin & Liu, 2018, p. 47-48) (See Figure 1). Hence, there must be some timeless values concealed apart from the draw of *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) being Brunei's feature film debut. As a matter of fact, besides the historical values that Espina pointed out, if we closely scrutinise the film's aesthetic construction e.g. narrative structure, plot design, character design and character relationship, as well as camerawork, we may argue that *Gema Dari Menara* is quite an intense and intriguing family melodrama.



Figure 1. Re-screening poster of Brunei's first feature film *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) for its golden jubilee celebration in 2018. Image courtesy of White Screen Cinema

In this paper, therefore, I simply argue that the narrative of *Gema Dari Menara*, as a family melodrama, is carefully constructed and straightforwardly propelled by the aforementioned melodramatic production elements. As a melodramatic fiction, it not only tells a story about an intense familial conflict revolving the theme of faith belief/faith loss which has been long rooted in the Bruneian cultural and historical tradition, it also implies the necessity of the negotiation between the dominant Islamic ideology and the increasingly secularised Bruneian civil society at the time. Such implied negotiation may be unintended or subconscious from the original purpose of making the film, but it is well-balanced and thus reflective of the historical and political reality of Brunei as a British Protectorate in the late 1960s. Moreover, I argue that the implied negotiation is, in a figurative way, also manifested through the struggling sibling relationship between the faithful older brother Azman and his antagonistic younger brother Nordin and little sister Noriah, in comparison to the historically and politically complicated relationship between the three then-British Borneo territories, namely Brunei, Sarawak, and Sabah (Northern Borneo). Finally, I argue that the above two aspects of the implied negotiation in *Gema Dari Menara* foreshadow the status quo of both the coexistence of the sacred Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) national ideology and secular pop culture in Brunei, and the fraternal, in/interdependent relationship between Brunei and her two neighbouring Malaysian states – Sarawak and Sabah – today.

### ***Gema Dari Menara*: A Bruneian Rite of Passage**

The storyline of *Gema Dari Menara* is very simple and straightforward and depicts a specific time when Brunei was going through a rite of passage. In the late 1960s, a middle-class family is living in an urban apartment in Brunei Town – the then-capital city of Brunei. The older

brother Azman (Pengiran Abbas P.H. Besar) is an upright and devout Muslim, while his younger brother Nordin (Harun Md. Dom) and little sister Noriah (Jamaliah Abu) are obsessed with the Western lifestyle, emblemized by picnicking with friends on the beach, birthday partying with live pop music and consuming alcohol, etc. The narrative is balanced on this tension, which is sometimes a caricatured contradiction between the 'Islamic lifestyle' depicted by Azman and the 'Western lifestyle' lived by Nordin and Noriah.

Nordin and Noriah think Azman is obsolete and has no place in this modern world while the dutiful Azman cannot get along with them. Their mother, Timah (Pengiran Umi BT. PG. Idrus) spoils the two younger siblings and blames Azman when conflicts arise between him and Nordin and Noriah. Before their father Bahar (Abu Bakar Ahmad) goes to Mecca for the obligatory Haj Pilgrimage, he acquiesces to his wife's decision to leave all the family money to Nordin, instead of Azman, to manage the family's daily expenses. But Nordin uses up all the money quickly: gambling over and losing dearly in cockfights and buying two luxury cars, one for himself, one for Noriah. The ensuing nightmare unfolds gradually: the family has to sell their house and move into a smaller house in order to make ends meet; Noriah and her lover Zul (Abd. Kadir Cheku) are caught post-fornication in a hotel room by the Shariah police, and then Noriah is imprisoned for three months. A drunk Nordin seriously injures himself by driving his fancy car into a tree. When Bahar returns from Mecca, he decides to stay in the small kampong house. The lamed Nordin and released Noriah both feel remorseful after reuniting with their family, and Azman receives them with compassion and forgiveness: 'let's forget the past.' The film ends on a hilarious but sour family unification – while Nordin chides Zul in rage for ruining his family's reputation and then pushes him into a water pond, punching him repeatedly, Noriah kneels down in front of Azman, wailing in repentance.

## The Historical and Socio-political Context

Before I unfold my discussion about the film, a note on Brunei's historical and socio-political transformation since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the late 1960s, when *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) was produced and first released, is a necessity. This is because I argue that the negotiation between sacred Islamic doctrine and the secular pop culture depicted in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) is derived from, and also the result of, the tug-of-war between the Brunei Sultans and the British colonial officials in Brunei – first the Residents, then the High Commissioners – in terms of governmental, ideological and cultural differences. After the Supplementary Agreement of 1905-06 was signed to confirm Brunei under British protection, in most of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Brown (1970) observed, '[t]he authority and power of the Resident – from the viewpoint of Brunei – was decidedly greater than the formerly possessed by the Sultans' (p. 120). Such a power imbalance, as a result, 'brought deliberating political and social consequences to the Sultanate which were difficult to rectify later even after the Bruneians themselves began to command their own destiny. In spite of the great wealth and prosperity the Sultanate was behind in social-economic progress compared to its progressive neighbours' (Hussainmiya, 2011, p. 18).

Only after Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III ascended to the throne in 1950, did the power game between the Brunei Government and Great Britain tilt in Brunei's favour. As the first Brunei Sultan who had received the British education in the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar, Malaya, Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III attempted to use his background to develop sufficient power in order to resist the British decision to combine the three former Brunei territories i.e. Brunei, Sarawak, and Sabah (Northern Borneo) to establish a united Malay commonwealth. He 'was determined to advance his country socially, politically and economically. In measured steps, he began to assert his independence and challenge the decision-making capability of the

British officers' (Hussainmiya, 2011, p. 23)<sup>1</sup>. Ultimately, he managed to succeed in keeping Brunei under concrete British protection while keeping a fraternal relationship with Sarawak and Sabah, who both decided to join Malaysia in 1963 (Brown, 1970, p. 123-124).

Because religious affairs were the only domain still in the hands of Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III during his early reign, in 1955, a Religious Council was established and it was stipulated that all the members of the Council had to be Malay and appointed by the Sultan himself. Since then religious affairs and the organizations which govern them have steadily grown in importance in Brunei. The centralized religious bureaucracy – the Religious Affairs Department – has expanded very considerably' (Brown, 1970, p.124-125). After the Bruneian Constitution was promulgated in 1959, the position of the Resident was replaced by a High Commissioner. 'Most of the powers formerly exercised by the Resident were divided among the Sultan and his newly established ministers' (Brown, 1970, p. 126), while the main function of the High Commissioner was reduced to the 'means of communication' between the Brunei government and the British Colonial Office in Malaya.

Under the newly promulgated Constitution, Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III gathered the powers around him by establishing the most important Council of Ministers. Among the six *ex-officio* members of the Council appointed by the Sultan, the Attorney General and State Financial Officer, nevertheless, were joint appointees of the Sultan and Great Britain, as these two positions represented British interests (Brown, 1970, p. 128). Therefore, although the overall scales of power had swung towards the side of the Sultan in the 1960s, the judicial and financial powers, which should be the most crucial two powers in any modern governance systems, had been still substantially controlled, at least equally shared, by the High Commissioner and the Sultan.

Such a power structure means that if the Brunei's Religious Affairs Department wanted to make a film for *Da'wah* (religious propaganda) purposes, it must have received financial approval from the State Financial Officer, who, as Brown pointed out, represented British interests. According to Espina (2013)<sup>2</sup>, it was indeed the Religious Affairs Department that initiated the idea of making a feature film:

One of the chief proponents of this project was the principal of the department, Pengiran Anak Kemaluddin. I was told that he, along with other Brunei civil servants at that time, had been to Kuala Lumpur to attend Filem Negara Malaysia courses on photography and filmmaking. They wanted to create a film for *Da'wah* (religious propagation), perhaps to address the growing secularisation and Westernisation among the Bruneian populace. They saw film as a potent medium to convey their concerns. (Espina, p. 65-66)

On 1 August 1968, Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah ascended to the throne as the 29<sup>th</sup> Sultan of Brunei. Nearly three months later, Brunei's first feature film *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) was released to the public in a commercial cinema – Boon Pang Baharu located in Brunei Town on

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<sup>1</sup> To know more about the 28<sup>th</sup> Brunei Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III, read B. A. Hussainmiya. (March 21, 1996, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition). *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III and Britain: The Making of Brunei Darussalam*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Espina did not elaborate on who told him the story about the making of *Gema Dari Menara*, neither did he mention whether the person who told him the story was an authentic source or not. However, at beginning of the film, we do see that Pengiran Anak Kemaluddin, who dresses in a Western style suit with a tie and a black songkok, gives a speech, stating the intention of making this film is 'to call all Muslims to uphold and practice the teachings of religion.' In the same speech sequence, we also see a congratulatory remark in Malay from the then-British High Commissioner Arthur Adair. I doubt that if the film had not been a 'measured' way to convey the religious messages, the High Commissioner would have been willing to show his endorsement for the film.

23 October 1968 (See Figure 2). If the ascension to the throne of His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah was an epoch-making event, the production and release of Brunei's first feature film was an important historical emblem following his ascension. It cannot be judged if the two events taking place in the same year was just a coincidence or directly relevant to each other, due to a lack of conclusive literature either way.



Figure 2. The premiere advertisement of *Gema Dari Menara* printed in the *Borneo Bulletin* (19 October 1968).

Image courtesy of Mervin Espina

However, there is a correlation between the two events. To a certain extent, the implied negotiation of sacred Islamic predomination and secular popular culture that I argue is present in *Gema Dari Menara* was both a symbolic reflection and a consequence of the power gaming and balancing between the 28<sup>th</sup> Sultan of Brunei and the British High Commissioner in the late 1960s. After ascension to the throne, Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah succeeded in continuing his father's political and socio-cultural policies and strategies, and leading Brunei to finally gain its full independence from Great Britain in 1984. It is my argument that to this day, the long coexistent status quo of the sacred MIB predomination and secular popular culture harmonising in Bruneian society was foreshadowed and connoted in *Gema Dari Menara*, which I will analyse in the following sections.

### The Melodramatic Representation of Implicated Negotiation

Melodrama as a form of dramatic work has been long rooted in Western literary and dramatic traditions, especially popular in 19<sup>th</sup> century operettas, novels, theatre, and salon entertainment in Europe. The application of 'melodramatic effect' and a range of variations to film production and later, televised drama series are all indebted to the German Expressionist filmmakers of the 1920s. Many of these filmmakers immigrated to America from Germany during the 1930s Nazi regime and brought their Expressionist cinematographic and melodramatic techniques to Hollywood. The combination of visual and dramaturgical devices was used in diverse genres of Hollywood productions, enabling family melodrama, comedy, and musical films to thrive

during the Golden Age of Classic Hollywood, later manifesting in Film Noir, domestic melodrama, and more mixed genres in the post-World War II 1950s and 1960s. The melodramatic technique since has not only been a strong and consistent component in filmmaking styles and waves around the world e.g. New German Cinema (early 1960s to early 1980s), but has also been carried through the decades to incarnate some of the popular contemporary Hollywood movies. The media theorist Thomas Elsaesser (2014) articulates this as ‘melodrama trauma mind-games’.

Elsaesser (1991) previously defined the term ‘melodrama’ in accordance with his observations on a range of the American family melodrama films –

In its dictionary sense, melodrama is a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects. This is still perhaps the most useful definition, because it allows melodramatic elements to be seen as constituents of a system of punctuation, giving expressive colour and chromatic contrast to the storyline, by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue. The advantage of this approach is that it formulates the problems of melodrama as problems of style and articulation’ (Elsaesser, p. 74).

Except for the opening speech sequence, the propagandistic montage of Islamic teaching in the middle, and the ending music for credits, the main core of the story in *Gema Dari Menara* is a family melodrama full of abrupt ups-and-downs, joy and tears. The limited music/song numbers mark the different tonalities and moods of the evolutionary sequences following the narrative fluctuation like a roller coaster. The folksong style overture sung by a teenage boy dressed in a traditional Malay costume and accompanied by a chorus of girls in traditional dresses, following the opening speech sequence, not only sets up an upbeat tone from the beginning, but also foreshadows the happy ending of the entire story. Moreover, the lyrics of the song draw out the thematic emphasis of the film – religious messages conveyed by a family story. Then the song smoothly converts into softer music with a similar melody produced by a wooden flute, accompanied by a series of tracking shots of Kampong Ayer (the Water Village), introducing the story background (See Figure 3). The ensuing call to prayer soon takes over, in concert with a few more shots of Kampong Ayer with the golden mosque and nearby residential apartments in the background. The sequence ends with a panorama shot panning from Kampong Ayer to the mosque in the foreground, then cutting to the appearance of big brother Azman walking out of his school and driving home as the beginning of the storyline.



Figure 3. Kampong Ayer as the story background. Image courtesy of Mervin Espina

This emotionally plain beginning starts to build up the tension between Azman and his two younger siblings, Nordin and Noriah, while the upbeat and joyful atmosphere accelerates to reach the climax of the opening sequence – Nordin’s birthday party scene. This celebratory scene is mainly composed of two Western style pop songs performed by two famous Malaysian pop singers (See Figures 4 & 5), while the imagery shows guests at the party dancing and drinking alcohol during the performance. The delightful celebration, however, comes to an abrupt stop with Azman’s quiet arrival at the party, fully dressed in his traditional Malay clothes. Furthermore, the emotional graph drops quickly after the siblings’ mother Timah shouts at Azman and drives him out of the home after he is accused of unspecified immoral behaviour. Emotional music accompanies Azman leaving the house.



Figure 4. Malaysian singer Abdullah Chik performing in Nordin’s birthday party scene. Image courtesy of Mervin Espina



Figure 5. Malaysian singer Kamariah Noor performing in Nordin’s birthday party scene. Image courtesy of Mervin Espina

Such ‘emotional effects’ which are signaled by accompanying music sequences ‘orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue’ (Elsaesser, 1991, p. 74) continue functioning as ‘a system of punctuation’ in the rest acts of the film. The two emotional ups are an unsurprising variation on the upbeat opening melody of the religious leitmotif, accompanying two sequences of tracking shots captured from Azman’s driving car. The first emotional up is when he drives with his friends on the way to visit Mr. Hassan in the Department of Religious Affairs (See Figure 6); the second is when he drives Mr. Hassan to a mosque to

deliver a religious dossier, after which Azman drives to the airport to pick up his father Hj Bahar who is returning from a pilgrimage to Makkah. In between the upbeat sequences, there is a very brief down turn when Noriah is sentenced to jail by the Shariah court due to her adultery with Zul. Another down turn comes later following a very dramatic, high-pitched music sequence that shows Nordin driving under the influence of alcohol and crashing his car into a tree – he ends up in the hospital. Towards the end, the heavenly, virtuous prayer calls emanate from the mosque when the limping Nordin passes it after being discharged from the hospital, and then emotionally strong music accompanies his reunion with his parents and Azman at a new home: both scenes indicate Nordin's repentance for his past. These two scenes, along with musical/vocal marks, also pair with an abrupt, up-and-down, emotional contrast for Nordin as an antagonistic character.



Figure 6. Azman (Pengiran Abbas P.H. Besar) drives with his friends to the Department of Religious Affairs.  
Image courtesy of Mervin Espina

Although the scene of Noriah's reunion with her family is one of the most comedic in the film – Nordin first pushes Zul into a pond and then shoves Noriah to the ground before Azman and Timah come to stop him – there is nonetheless no music accompaniment at all, merely Noriah's repentant wailing for forgiveness from Azman. However, earlier when Zul comes to jail to pick up Noriah and promises to marry her, the upbeat religious leitmotif hovers in the background over the entire scene, as it does during her return to home scene later, emphasising her remorseful sincerity.

The family, including Azman generously accept both Noriah's and Nordin's appeals for forgiveness. As Azman says to Nordin: 'Let's forget the past, Nordin. Take it as a lesson for you.' As a matter of fact, before Nordin arrives home from the hospital, a scene, which is set in a smaller house, shows Azman, his wife and his parents living harmoniously, accompanied by the upbeat religious leitmotif until the now physically disabled Nordin shows up. This musical accompaniment has already foreshadowed that, as Espina observed, 'the story concludes on a happy note' (2013, p. 69). From my point of view, it is not Nordin and Noriah's repentant return that is meaningful, but Azman and their parents' forgiveness of them, that confirm Malay traditional family values, including religious leniency, and the profound negotiation between the predominated Islamic doctrine and a Westernised lifestyle. It is in this sense that the musical accompaniment in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) as a mark of 'emotional effects' in 'a system of punctuation', not only melodramatically accentuates the contrasting moods, but also narratively articulates the emotional ups-and-downs, stylistically underlining profound thematic implications.



In his study of 1950s American melodramas directed by Douglas Sirk e.g. *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Imitation of Life* (1959), Murvey (1989) stated: 'Melodrama can be seen as having an ideological *function* in working certain contradictions through to the surface and representing them in an aesthetic form...Hollywood films made with a female audience in mind tell a story of contradiction, not of reconciliation' (p. 43). Although *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) is about reconciliation through the represented and concentrated ideological contradiction between the members of a Bruneian middle-class family; obviously, its targeted audience is not only female, but also male. The contradictions between the family members are multifold, but they are concentrated on the different attitudes towards the relationship between sacred Islamic tradition and the secular Westernised lifestyle. In this respect, there is some thematic similarity in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) which is comparable to the Japanese melodrama films made in the 1950-60s, especially Yasujiro Ozu's late films such as *Tokyo Story* (1953), and *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962), in which the theme of dismantlement and Westernisation of Japanese traditional families after World War II is manifested.

The contradiction between Islamic tradition and a Westernised lifestyle is mainly represented by the stiff and delicate sibling relationship between Azman, Nordin and Noriah, which is described throughout the story as if the entire film is just about a superficial, ideological *function* of judging a dichotomy of faith belief and faith loss. However, as I argued earlier, the implicated ideological emphases of the film are profoundly elicited from the comedic closure, whereby the consistent conflict between Azman and Nordin/Noriah is displaced by Nordin's resentment towards his 'old buddy' Zul while Noriah is kneeling and wailing for forgiveness from Azman, instead of blaming Zul. One of the reasons that Nordin hits Zul is because Nordin blames Zul for ruining his family's reputation; from the previous scene, however, we know that Zul has already promised that he will marry Noriah. Therefore, the remaining contradiction in the ending scene has already been transformed from the concentrated, primary contradiction between Azman and Nordin/Noriah to the mitigated one between the 'old buddies' Nordin and Zul. Moreover, since Azman has already forgiven Nordin, we know he will do the same for Noriah, although it is not articulated explicitly in the ending scene. 'A happy note', as Espina (2013, p. 69) observed, over the ending credits, confirms the future, off-screen reconciliation between the three siblings. It is precisely this hilarious, open ending that implies that a sort of open-minded negotiation must be made in terms of the relationship between the Islamic tradition that Azman holds dear and the secular lifestyle that Nordin and Noriah have lived in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968). The Islamic leniency incarnated by Azman and his willingness to negotiate with other cultures to coexist and continue harmoniously emphasised in such an open-ended closure is the much more profound and powerful ideological *function* aestheticised by a melodramatic family tale than in an ending of a one-sided winner.

Although in melodrama, plot and character relations are always prioritised over the portrayal of characters i.e. characterisation, the latter is still an important, supplementary technique, alongside the former two ones, to drive the storytelling forward. The lack of clear winner in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) is derived from the stereotypical characterisation formula rooted in the melodramatic tradition. As Elsaesser (1991) pointed out: 'One of the characteristic features of melodramas in general is that they concentrate the point of view of the victim: what makes the films mentioned above exceptional is the way they manage to present *all* the characters convincingly as victims' (p. 86). Here, Elsaesser is analysing American melodramas. However in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968), the family members as a whole reflect the sentiments of Elsaesser's address. None of the main characters in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) is a typical winner – they are all victims, albeit for different reasons. For example, Nordin ends up with a limp due to this drunk driving; Noriah goes to prison for three months as a result of her fornication with Zul; both their parents and Azman are indirect victims of Nordin and Noriah's

unlawful deeds — they have ruined their family's reputation. Meanwhile, the parents and Azman are also direct victims of their own actions: the father Hj Bahar loses all his savings because he is persuaded by Timah to leave all the family money in Nordin's instead of Azman's care. As a result, they have to move out of their family home into a smaller residence. Considering that this downfall happens during the specific sacred timing of Bahar's pilgrimage to Mecca, the laws of melodrama dictate that the entangled process of victimisation in the narrative itself, must hold somebody accountable for blame or punishment. The psychological demand for scapegoats leads to the comedic ending – Noriah and Zul become the 'sinful pair' to blame and punish (although they have decided to marry each other), because their fornication has stained the family reputation.

Because of Azman's insistence on his religious belief and cultural traditions, he is first distanced from his two siblings, then driven out of home by his mother, and mistrusted by his father, resulting in his personal discomfort with his family and consequently he is helpless to stop Nordin from squandering all the family money. At the end of the film, Azman possesses his own but much smaller house and takes care of his parents, cementing his role as the most righteous but also the most victimized of characters. In fact, the story mainly unfolds through Azman's point of view, showing him attending a series of Islamic teaching activities at the same time that he witnesses the downfall of his family. This situating of Azman as victim underscores his sublime leniency when he forgives his repentant younger brother and sister, reconciling with them for a co-existent future.

Therefore, the main storyline revolving the ill-fated Bruneian middle-class family in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) qualifies as the typical 'something melodramatic' in visual presentations delineated by Elsaesser as following:

...when in ordinary language we call something melodramatic, what we often mean is an exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human actions and emotional responses, a from-the-sublime-to-the-ridiculous movement, a foreshortening of lived time in favour of intensity – all of which produces a graph of much greater fluctuation, a quicker swing from one extreme to the other than is considered natural, realistic or in conformity with literary standards of verisimilitude: in the novel we like to sip our pleasures, rather than gulp them. (Elsaesser, 1991, p. 76)

'An exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern' constitutes nearly all the key plot points that underpin the narrative structure of *Gema Dari Menara* (1968), propelling the story to move forward melodramatically with intensity and ups-and-downs of both character actions and emotional fluctuations. For example, in Nordin's birthday party scene, when Azman arrives to celebrate Nordin's birthday by dressing up in traditional Malay garb, he is immediately greeted by Nordin calling him 'sarcastic'; later Azman is driven out of home by his mother Timah. On the other hand, Nordin and Noriah, including their parents, have a differing pattern of 'exaggerated rise-and-fall' emotional experiences in this scene. Before Azman arrives, Nordin and Noriah, alongside other invited guests, have been all immersed in dancing, singing and drinking alcohol and 'having a good time'; after Azman arrives, all the guests quieten down and leave the party one by one, causing Nordin and Noriah to fall 'down' instantly from their emotional 'high'. Moreover, Azman's unwillingness to join the party and accompaniment by a woman and a little girl dissatisfy his parents, and result in his expulsion from the home. This all-out, 'rise-and-fall' scene involving all the family members literally foreshadows a mid-point scene, in which Timah persuades Bahar to leave all the family savings to Nordin, instead of Azman, before Bahar sets out for Mecca. This crucial decision made by Timah, acquiesced to by Bahar, quickly leads to two 'rise-and-fall' sequences related to both of them. Firstly, Timah soon realises

Nordin has squandered all the family savings and their house has to be sold to make ends meet. She begs Azman to stop Nordin from selling their house, but Azman can do nothing since Nordin is now in charge of the family assets. Secondly, after Hj Bahar excitedly returns to Brunei from Mecca, his joy soon turns into distress after the discovery of all the calamities that have befallen his family because of his acquiescence to Timah's bad idea. These two 'rise-and-fall' sequences exaggeratedly swing the lives of the parent couple 'from one extreme to the other' in a much condensed, shortened period of time, in order to increase the dramatic intensity and the characters' emotional fluctuations. Here, the realistic portrayal of the two characters, and the revelation of their deep psychological motives, are not that important, but the need to accelerate the narrative pace and intensify the emotive ups-and-downs to define 'something melodramatic' have been prioritised.

The above scene with Hj Bahar is also justified as 'a from-the-sublime-to-the-ridiculous movement' elaborated by Elsaesser (1991, p. 76). As a proud, devout Muslim who has just returned from the pilgrimage to Mecca, Hj Bahar enthusiastically reunites with his wife Timah and his oldest son Azman at the airport; in the next scene, he has to accept the disastrous reality of his family, partially because of his previous irresponsible decision. However, in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968), no scene is more like a 'from-the-sublime-to-the-ridiculous movement' than what happens to Noriah and Zul, the 'dissolute couple', in the hilarious, open-ended finale. As discussed above, in the scene before the finale, when Zul comes to jail to pick up Noriah, he promises to marry her, and she accepts with a smile. This scene somehow sublimates their once corrupt relationship by a promise of legal binding as redemption in the future; after the couple arrives at Azman's home, however, such a sublime redemption is evaporated immediately when Nordin greets them by pushing Zul into a pond and punching him repeatedly and then knocking Noriah down to the ground when she tries to stop him (See Figure 7). It is Azman who runs into the frame moments later and stops Nordin; then Noriah kneels down in front of Azman, wailing for his forgiveness, while Zul sits down on the edge of the water pond, lowering his head in full frustration. All of a sudden, the illusionary, idealistic sublime emanated in the previous scene is transposed into a disillusioned, ridiculous farce, which marks the final melodramatic 'rise-and-fall' plot movement and the 'up-and-down' emotional fluctuation for the two characters, Noriah and Zul. More importantly, the intentional exaggeration of the couple's fall and down juxtaposed with Nordin's hysteria in this hilarious, melodramatic familial reunification finale contrastively underscores Azman's firm and righteous moral standing, which appears predominant in any future reconciled negotiation and coexistence among the three siblings.



Figure 7. Nordin (Harun Md. Dom) pushes Zul (ABD. Kadir Cheku) into the water pond and then hits Noriah (Jamaliah Abu) when she tries to stop him in the open-ended finale scene. Image courtesy of Mervin Espina

## The Social and Cultural Implication

As the first Bruneian feature film, *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) was actually commissioned to National Film Department of Malaysia to produce. In other words, the main production crew including the director and cinematographer all came from Malaysia. Some Bruneian local talents, many of whom were officers of the Department of Religious Affairs, joined the performance roster with Malaysian actors and actresses. However, Espina found ‘it’s funny that the “bad guys” were portrayed by Malaysians and not locals’ (2013, p. 69). Perhaps it was not a coincidence that Malaysian actors and actresses played the ‘sinful’ roles (e.g. Nordin, Noriah and Zul; the two pop singers who symbolize decadence are Malaysian as well), while Bruneian locals played the faithful characters (Azman, Mr. Hassan and all the government officials), even though most of the local performers were not professional actors. Such a line-up may be explained by a retrospective on the historical relationship between Brunei and its two fraternal neighbours – Sarawak and Sabah, states of Malaysia.

Brunei had ruled Sarawak and Sabah for a long period; however, after World War II, with the British priority of forming up a ‘Northern Borneo Federation’, ‘Sarawak-based officers were seconded to serve Brunei’ from 1948, including the British Resident himself (Hussainmiya, 2011, p. 19). ‘This stirred a great deal of indignation--by creating an inferiority complex in Brunei—that made it virtually impossible to promote any common understanding with the Sarawak administration. The Sultan felt it as an affront to his dignity’ (Hussainmiya and Mail, 2014, p. 16). In another account, Hussainmiya (2011) continued to address the issue: ‘More importantly, their [Bruneians’] subservience to the Sarawak administration from 1948 onward had sharpened their consciousness of themselves as the scions of the Malay, Islamic and Monarchic culture’ (p. 19). That is perhaps the precise reason why all the ‘sinful characters’ in *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) were played by Malaysian actors and actresses while the ‘faithful characters’ particularly the old brother Azman were portrayed by Bruneian locals. Another plausible reason for such a casting roster in the film may be because of the Malaysian connection to the 1962 nationalist rebellion in Brunei.

In the film, Azman regards himself as an orthodox, devout believer of Islam; Nordin and Noriah represent the unfaithful, who consider Azman a conservative throwback. In the end, Azman accepts Nordin’s repentance, lecturing him: ‘Let’s forget the past, Nordin. Take it as a lesson for you.’ Later, Azman presumably accepts Noriah’s appeal for forgiveness in the open-ended finale scene. Such a ‘delicate’ sibling relationship between Azman, and Nordin and Noriah is symbolically comparable to the realistic relationship between Brunei and its two neighbouring states of Sarawak and Sabah, both of whom had joined the Malaysia Federation a few years before *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) was produced.

Nowadays, Brunei enjoys a harmonious and coexistent relationship with Sarawak and Sabah in Malaysia. But half a century ago, Bruneians considered themselves the orthodox successors of the Malay, Islamic and Monarchic cultural over the neighbouring Sarawak and Sabah, thus treasuring more of its religious orthodoxy and political autonomy (Hussainmiya, 2011; Hussainmiya and Mail, 2014). Metaphorically, the historical reality that Brunei dodged during its intimate relationship with Peninsular Malaysia to resist the potential Federation association with Sarawak and Sabah, and Brunei’s power gaming with both the British Colonial representative and the brotherly Sarawak’s supervision, very much resembles Azman’s relationship with his two younger siblings and their parents in the film. For example, Azman’s intentional prevention of his religious belief being stained by the lifestyle of Nordin and Noriah, Azman’s strong conflicting views about both religion and finance contrasted with Nordin’s, and his restrained disagreement with his mother Timah and his father Hj Bahar (whereby the former spoils the two younger siblings while the latter always acquiesces with her decisions).

It is also worth noting that Azman's close communion with Mr. Hassan is just like the once warm personal relationship between the Bruneian Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III and Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of independent Malaya, before the Sultan tried to shun the British notion of Brunei's association with Sarawak and Sabah<sup>3</sup>. Later, after the duo became two states of Malaysia Federation, the Bruneian ruler intentionally cozied up with them in order to counter Tunku's 'enlarged Federation plan' – 'a possible Brunei-Malayan merger' (Hussainmiya and Mail, 2014, p. 37). Therefore, Brunei's power gaming with its British protector and Brunei's dodging around its two Borneo neighbours Sarawak and Sabah, and Peninsula Malaysia, in the 1950s and 1960s, are figuratively allegorised by the protagonist Azman's delicate and restrained relationship with his family members – his younger siblings Nordin and Noriah, and their parents Timah and Haji Bahar.

## Conclusion

When analysing the social structure of Brunei, King (1994) summarised: 'The sultanate therefore provides us with the most direct example of a sociopolitical system whose constituent elements, both ideological and non-ideological, demonstrate process of, on one hand, transformation and innovation and on the other, continuity and the celebration of tradition' (p. 176). *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) is a perfect pictorial footnote for King's commentary in its unfolding of an intense and fluctuated melodramatic family tale, so as to visually invite the now and then audiences to interpret the Brunei society via multiple lenses culturally, politically, and ideologically, during a specific time when Brunei was going through a rite of passage.

More interestingly, the allegorical relationship between the protagonist Azman and the antagonists – Nordin and Noriah – his two younger siblings, mirrors the historically complicated intimacy between Brunei and its two neighbouring states Sarawak and Sabah in Malaysia. Azman's ultimate forgiveness of both Nordin and Noriah also accentuates the religious tolerance of Islam and its willingness to negotiate and coexist with the Westernised secular trend among the Bruneian populace in 1960s. As a result, Brunei's first feature film *Gema Dari Menara* (1968) foreshadowed the long-standing negotiation between, and the harmonious coexistence of, the predominant sacred MIB tradition and secular popular culture in the sultanate from the 1960s onwards.

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<sup>3</sup> Hussainmiya, B.A. & Mail, A.H. (2014). "No federation please - We are Bruneians": Scuttling the northern Borneo closer association proposals. *Working Paper No. 11*, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam. p. 26-35.

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