

Archipelagic Modernism and Traditions of Gender

The Matrifocal Gaze and the “Undecided” Modern Girl

YOUTHFUL OLD MAID TAKES ON JAKARTA

To begin this chapter, I briefly return to Usmar Ismail’s troubled but successful film *Tiga Dara*. As I showed in the previous chapter, *Tiga Dara* represents an especially varied aesthetic-economic compromise aimed at bridging the gap between lower-class audiences and elite ones who preferred Hollywood and other foreign fare. The film, as I argued, uses its typically cosmopolitan, purposely “unnatural” mixture of traditional, modern, regional, and global flourishes to woo a wider range of spectators. But as I show below, it also addresses an issue, perhaps among the most pivotal in the conception of regional modernities, that links the allegedly private domain of the household to the public sphere. At stake, I contend, is the historically established “domestic” power of women and its potential to shape national and regional societies in particular ways. As I will explain in the following sections, this power, and the female figures who are shown to wield it, becomes the source of a key regional cinematic trope that I term the “matrifocal gaze.” Comparing *Tiga Dara* with films from elsewhere in the region and with the gender politics of Indian cinema, I highlight the uniqueness of Southeast Asian approaches to the “universality” of patriarchy in modern societies. Building on the splits and contests between different groups that I show to be centered in regional movies, I also focus on growing divisions over the ethnicity of local modernity, particularly in Malay films that foreshadow the bitter split between Malaysia and Singapore in 1965.

In line with ongoing debates over shifting gender roles in the 1950s, *Tiga Dara*’s plot is driven, and alternately stalled, by the effort to marry off the “aging” twenty-nine-year-old Nunung, the eldest of three sisters in an upper-middle class family



FIGURE 10. In both of these shot–reverse shot sequences from *Tiga Dara*, young women are placed in positions of implicit power through the use of formal techniques. In the top pair of stills, Nunung stands to converse with her father, who is seated and wears a typical worried-yet-firm expression and body language. In the bottom pair, the middle sister, Nana (Mieke Wijaya), is briefly given a more extreme sense of formal authority (through pointing the camera up at her in the over-the-shoulder shot with her grandmother [right]), also around the issue of making her own decisions regarding marriage. The choice of lens and framing magnify her image, making her appear almost “larger than life” in confronting the traditional authority of her elders.

during early postindependence in Jakarta (fig. 10). Women her age should already be married with children, her grandmother laments. Nunung’s personal lack is therefore a potential source of (public) shame to herself and to those closest to her. Belying her family’s distress, however, Nunung generally exudes confidence and appears unconcerned with her marital status. After the death of her mother several years earlier, as the firstborn female, Nunung has inherited a key position of authority in the domestic affairs of the house. Despite the concerns of other family members with preventing her from becoming a *perawan tua* (old maid), she is hence also accorded a fair amount of leverage to determine her own fate, romantic and otherwise.

From the beginning, the film’s blocking, camerawork, and editing collude with this power, investing Nunung and often her sisters with a palpable visual authority. In her conversations with her father, for example, we consistently look

up at Nunung and down on him. This further materializes the sense of Nunung's inherited responsibility, power, and duty. Although her influence is limited in scope, it is implied that Nunung may want to savor and hone her role as would-be matriarch before moving into an unfamiliar domestic situation—one where her authority would potentially be reduced as a newcomer if she were to move in with her husband's family. In her current home, Nunung is able to wield tradition with one hand while denying or modulating it with the other, using her unspoken, but constantly shown, agency to put off marrying, which paradoxically extends her role as a surrogate "mother." Doing so involves negotiating the youthful impulsiveness of her sisters, the staid traditionality of her grandmother, and the unambitious reticence of her father. The ability to engage with these varied combinations of ages and interests gives Nunung an ambiguous yet dynamic status. This in turn imbues the household she runs, and the film in which it is a central component, with a multifarious sense of time and progression. While others are put off by the challenges she faces, Nunung works with increasing consciousness to shape the future around her in a way that might better suit her own needs and those of her younger siblings—although they don't seem to realize it yet.

Outside the family's home, the city appears far less pensive, full of actors racing to fulfill the ever-expanding hopes and ideals of independence, while barely pausing to lick the social, economic, and spiritual wounds inflicted by savage years of Japanese occupation and nationalist struggle (1942–49). In the face of this inevitable flow, Nunung is neither "now"—like the city itself and her irreverent, yet eager-to-marry younger sisters—or "then"—like her staid, bureaucrat father. Her aging grandmother also clearly represents a kind of "pastness." But as I have shown in the context of regional vernacular modernist films, the past—be it in the form of conventions, media technologies, or, as in this case, a character—is very much alive and never static. In her own way, the old woman is positioned as a more experienced connoisseur of the heterogeneous time that Nunung is learning to perceive and wield. The grandmother's practiced manipulation of the girls and their father in the service of her own goals and visions of an apposite future reveals an embedded domestic power that, like Nunung's, reaches beyond the home. For Nunung, whose mother's absence has in some sense made her a protégé of her grandmother, this "traditional" power is a tool with which to expand her contemporary role as a woman. As Ekky Imanjaya has also noted, in various ways, the film's structure and narrative raise "issues regarding women's rights and social status" (Imanjaya 2021:100). The air of light family melodrama and romantic comedy that *Tiga Dara* appears at first to be selling is belied by its entanglement in a deadly serious contest (fig. 11).

The questions raised by the film connect the capital city to small islands of domestic influence within, and implicitly outside, its borders. As its typically fragmented form, heterogeneous time, and deceptively amusing narrative reveal, the



FIGURE 11. A number of shots in *Tiga Dara* appear to suggest a “transfer” of power to Nunung from her grandmother. The two women look meaningfully into each other’s eyes with the elder woman placed slightly higher but almost on the same level.

“private” politics of the home are surreptitiously shaping the public sphere such that the very foundations—and the outcome—of modernity are at stake. Here, traditions relating to gender and power are given spaces—created by films’ combinations of archipelagic form and particular regional narratives—where they receive special consideration as principles aimed for inclusion in local formulations of modernity. In a related yet converse way, with the institution of more formalized realism and less self-reflexivity in East Asian vernacular modernisms, Miriam Hansen sees a different pattern emerge in the increasing appearances of the “modern girl” who is positioned to challenge “traditional” gender binaries. For Hansen, the function of the modern girl is mainly to highlight the traps and paradoxes of modern life. These consist in the “socioeconomic conditions and ideological fixations that make [female] characters fail” (2012:616). In contrast to regional films’ tendency to call attention to themselves as constructions, modern girls are shown to fail in Shanghai and Tokyo films that increasingly seek to mimic or “copy” a certain view of reality in their use of Western classical conventions, especially in their mainstream iterations. One important effect of this, Hansen argues, is that movies work to naturalize or give the appearance of inevitability to certain consequences understood to accompany the global rise of a particular kind of industrial capitalist society.¹

In my analysis, what emerges most profoundly in the open-ended form and narratives of Southeast Asian cinemas is how tradition, particularly historical ideas of women’s agency, informs and challenges global patterns in which

Western gender ideals—along with their significant cultural baggage—are positioned as an inescapable modern paradigm. Such Western ideals have circulated to places like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, as well as to East Asia. But the idea that they could easily or uncomplicatedly take root there assumes the existence of particular modern family structures, and relations between men and women within them, that are often quite distinct from those in Southeast Asia. At the center of *Tiga Dara*, for example, Nunung's status as neither a typical "modern girl" nor a woman held back by the "inexorable chains of the past" resonates with the kinds of figures rising to the fore across various regional media at the time, including literature, theater, film, and visual arts. Nunung's lack of temporal fixity according to global modern standards is precisely what I suggest imbues her with a dynamic aura, an aspect that captivates those around her in particular ways. In this context, Nunung's modern "undecidedness" offers an opportunity to influence the circumstances and timing of her position as a woman in developing independent Indonesia.

We might look at the foundational connection of regional popular cinemas to live vernacular theaters in a similar way. Due to a complex combination of historical and class-based divisions in taste, market conditions, and embedded aesthetic attitudes, regional filmmakers refuse, or at times are discouraged from, clearly differentiating between live performance and film, and therefore between past and present, local and transnational, live and mediatized. In this context, and especially with movies inheriting and sharing their central place as engines of regional modernity with theaters, the idea and experience of modernity itself is made pointedly "undecided." Yes, Hollywood and other forms of imported, Western modernist aesthetics or political structures have inevitably penetrated the consciousness of emergent nations throughout the region. But strong cultural, political, economic, and epistemological undercurrents receive and reposition such elements in ways that prevent them from becoming modern in the way that Hansen calls "an incarnation of *the modern*" (2000:11). As we have seen, the lack of clarity about what is modern conveys stigma for some, but for others it carries productive, potentially radical, possibilities.

One key to this radical potential in comparison to other global cinemas is borne out in distinction to Hansen's positioning of the "modern girl" figure on interwar East Asian screens as a critique of what she terms traditional gender binaries. For Hansen, the critique and the girl are still fated to tragically fail in their progressive mission, poetically pointing to the paradoxes inherent in global capitalism as they do. In the post–World War II period we are discussing in Southeast Asia, both Chinese and Japanese films abruptly broke with established patterns of gender representation. In the latter case, this change was especially abrupt, comparable to a "180-degree transformation" (Saito 2014:336). After Japan's loss to the Allied forces and subsequent occupation by the United

States (1945–52), filmmakers under heavy American censorship began turning out “idea films” aligned with American directives to democratize now demilitarized Japan. As Ayako Saito shows, these films were filled with ostensibly liberated, independent “female characters as oracles of democracy” (330). Such figures were also heavily overdetermined by the political situation. At the same time, onscreen Japanese men were “denounced [and] culturally and visually castrated” (329). Yet soon after the occupation was over, Saito argues, filmmakers appeared to overcompensate via the emergent *ero-guro* (erotic-grotesque) genre in which the female body was reappropriated, heavily sexualized, and symbolically reconquered by the otherwise defeated and defiled authority of Japanese patriarchy (350).

After the declaration of the People’s Republic of China in 1949—in some sense mirroring the Japanese idea film but in a very different, overtly triumphant political context—films were filled with “strong women figures who were characteristic of Chinese revolutionary representation” (McGrath 2023:238). For Jason McGrath, these figures were not generally positioned as objects of a directly eroticized look; rather, like male characters, onscreen women were constructed as politicized models of comportment. Their “socialist realist gaze,” peering into the distant, glorious revolutionary communist future, could be emulated by audience members. In concert with this development, themes of romanticized love were heavily deemphasized, again departing from China’s cinematic past. Spectator interest and pleasure were instead generated, McGrath writes, by the “*replacement* of private libidinal desire with the appeal of a revolutionary sublime, to which Communist film protagonists directed their longing” (2023:177, emphasis in original).

In both Chinese and Japanese postwar cinemas, then, women on the screen undergo radical shifts in related-yet-distinct ways, in line with the alternating political currents of triumph and loss, respectively. The changes in both places (and subsequent change *back* in Japan) are claimed in relation to what are generally understood as local histories of patriarchal dominance. As I have shown in previous chapters, Southeast Asian nations also underwent extremely radical transformations during and after World War II, changes that are continually reflected on and returned in the work of emergent national filmmakers. But what would happen if, as in much of the region, traditional structures of gender and power were matrifocal, which describes a high level of structurally embedded female influence in societies that may otherwise be labeled patriarchal?²² And what if this is precisely what the formal gaps and undecidedly modern images in regional films allow to seep through, inflecting the “modern girl,” imbuing her with a different mission, fate, and path of transformation?

In *Tiga Dara*, Nunung appears to relish the position of woman of the house that she inherited after her mother’s passing. Her desire to put off marriage despite her “advancing” age will allow her to occupy the position for a bit longer as she watches over the developments in her family while shuttling back and forth between her home and the bustling capital city surrounding it. Despite occasional difficulties

in dealing with heavy traffic, Nunung is shown to negotiate urban landscapes with the self-assurance of someone who occupies a stable place in society—a position that also appears anchored by her status in the family home. This confidence, in turn, imbues Nunung with a certain magnetism; as she wanders Jakarta's streets singing in one of the film's musical numbers, young (and also not-so-young) men constantly bump into or approach her, with several immediately asking for her hand, imploring her to "*pilihlah aku*" or "pick me." As she politely but firmly turns them down or erects lyrical hurdles in their processes of wooing her, the film implies even more strongly that the difficulties in getting Nunung married are a matter of her own choice.

THE MATRIFOCAI HOME VS. THE MODERN BOY

To deepen the sense of the role of tradition (and power) in Nunung's position as an "undecided" modern girl who is also quite sure of herself, I turn to the Malaysian P. Ramlee's classic *Ibu Mertuaku* (*My Mother-in-Law*, 1962). Ramlee's film will provide an apt, comparative formulation of the home-based power of Malay women in Malaysia around the same time. It will also provide a clearer demonstration of the real tensions embedded in contests over gender and power in the region at the time. Ahmad Fuad Rahmat argues that the narrative and formal elements of *Ibu Mertuaku* collude to "position . . . [matrifocality] as an active force of culture making that pervades the taken-for-granted expansion of the modern public sphere" (2020:97). Through its exposition of the politics of domestic space in particular, Ramlee's film highlights the continuing relevance of an enduring, supranational Malay matrifocality that flows beneath the otherwise patriarchal surface of contemporary Malaysian society. In the context of *Ibu Mertuaku*, the matrifocal appears as if it will "eventually . . . dictate the terms of Malay modernity itself" (Rahmat 2020:97).

Like *Tiga Dara*, *Ibu Mertuaku* positions local pop music—combining Latin, Western, Arab, Malay, and other elements—as a central indicator of the times. The opening credits roll over the image of a saxophone and then cut to a radio announcer who exclaims, "*Inilah radio Singapura!*" (This is radio Singapore!). A song begins under a sequence of medium close-ups of hands playing a transnational array of instruments (bongos, stand-up bass, accordion, piano, drum set, and maracas), ending on a medium shot of the band leader, P. Ramlee's character Kassim Selamat (fig. 12), coming in on tenor saxophone. He appears as the quintessential regional modern man: guiding his band with deft hand gestures and other cues, he looks in command of the very texture and sound of the now as it is simultaneously produced and broadcast to thousands of radio sets throughout Malaysia and beyond. In front of one such set in Singapore, a young woman named Sabariah (Sarimah) literally swoons, running her hands over the speaker in an exaggerated manner as if vicariously stroking Kassim's face, then rolling