

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



FIGURE 12. P. Ramlee as the band leader Kassim Selamat in the film *Ibu Mertuaku*, which he also directed and cowrote. His closed eyes foreshadow the blindness with which he is stricken later in the film.

on her bed with an enraptured look. The consciously exaggerated emotions and facial expressions add melodrama while calling attention to themselves as comically overdone, signaling Ramlee's mastery of regional modes of vernacular theatrical cinema.

What the film, and its exaggerated form, are saying about gender is also purposely over-the-top and similarly subject to shifts in meaning. For the moment, Kassim looks to be the master of Sabariah's desires for all that is new and contemporary (and masculine) in the region. But Sabariah, the daughter of a wealthy widow, Nyonya Mansoor (Mak Dara), soon awakens from her trance and picks up the phone. In the radio studio, Selamat is surprised but takes her call. It is now he who swoons as Sabariah tells him his "mellifluous saxophone moves her heart," after which she asks him to meet her at a Jazz club that very night. Although taken aback, Kassim's excitement gets the better of him, and he agrees. As Sabariah strums his heartstrings over the telephone, it already seems that Kassim is not the only one able to wield a powerful influence via electrified modern soundwaves. In line with the "real" picture of gender and power that the film now begins to build, the only person Sabariah can't seem to control is her mother, Nyonya Mansoor. The crass-talking, cigarette-smoking Mansoor is presented as an autocrat in a Malay *sarong* and *kebaya* who lords her authority over family and home.

After a few comedic plot twists through which Sabariah and Kassim fall in love, Mansoor stands firmly in the way of their marriage. For her, Kassim's status as a modern, globally styled "freelance" icon is unclear. In the context of Malaya, despite his fame and trappings of wealth, Kassim lacks a stable job and a proper socioeconomic foundation; and Mansoor has already lined up a Malay doctor who has just returned from medical school in the U.K. to marry Sabariah. The result is a battle of wills between an equally hardheaded mother and daughter. Cognizant,

it seems, that she will inherit her mother's power, Sabariah finally puts her foot down, playing at subverting the established power of her mother. For Mansoor, however, this is no game, and the result is an elaborate, almost shocking, show of a matriarch undiminished by "acquiescing" to the demands of her daughter and next-in-command.

When Kassim answers Nyonya Mansoor's order to appear at her door, pulling up in a fancy Cadillac with his whole band in tow, she is not impressed. Descending from the house's elevated private quarters on the second floor, she pulls Kassim by the arm into the foyer, where guests are assembled, leaving his band confused outside. Using what appears to be considerable physical strength to back up her cultural authority, she pushes him to the floor and orders him to marry her daughter that very moment. Shouting a command to the male imam she has preemptively called in to perform the ceremony, she returns to her bedroom, where she counts out a pile of money. When the ritual is complete, she returns to the living room, throws the money and a suitcase of clothes at the newlyweds, disowns her daughter, and commands them to leave the house immediately. Although this showcases the "success" of Sabariah and Kassim realizing their modernizing desires by choosing their own marriage partners, unlike Nunung, Sabariah has now been disengaged from the lineage of power and money that flows to her from her mother; the scene's violence and negative tone foretell a disastrous outcome. From here on out, the film shifts from comedy to tragedy.

As it turns out, Sabariah has her own special rules for her new family unit with Kassim: he must no longer perform onstage, lest he attract the gazes of other women or further reduce the chances of reconciling with the matriarch Mansoor. Lacking savings or other qualifications, he takes a job in construction, and with the couple's lavish lifestyle, they quickly fall into poverty. When Sabariah is about to give birth to their first child, she relents and begs her mother's forgiveness, returning to the comfort of her family home without Kassim. When he calls, Nyonya Mansoor informs him, falsely, that Sabariah has died in childbirth. Over the next months, Kassim literally cries himself blind. Sabariah, however, thinks Kassim has abandoned her and agrees to marry the doctor her mother originally chose, who raises the child together with her. Kassim is temporarily saved by another, culturally and financially enabled mother and daughter who feel sorry for him, take him into their home, and sponsor his return to the stage. But when they find a doctor to cure his blindness, it turns out to be Sabariah's husband. Regaining his vision, Kassim sees how he has been manipulated by Nyonya Mansoor, resulting in him losing his wife and only son. Kassim is so stricken by what he is witness to that he blinds himself again with a knife and wanders off to a future in which his only certainty appears to be tragedy.

Here, unlike the politically fated falls and constructed "liberations" of onscreen women we have seen in China and Japan, the emergent figure who must invariably and poetically fail is not the modern girl but the "modern boy," represented

by Ramlee's Kassim Selamat. In the end, although Malaysia in the early 1960s is ostensibly capitalist and patriarchal, his status as modern, individualistic, and male in a more typically global sense seems to unmoor and weaken him. The women he encounters, in contrast, use their traditionally sourced strength to adapt to changes around them and rule the day. As Rahmat also asserts, they do so without appearing behind the times or as static or idealized remnants of a vanished past. Nyonya Mansoor is certainly anything but a figure of nostalgia. She is presented as mean-spirited and manipulative yet not quite evil because her power is culturally justified. Her influence deftly bridges the private and the public, the past and the present, and, with her house and base of operations in Singapore, the rural/traditional and the urban.

As Timothy Barnard writes of *Ibu Mertuaku* and other, similarly themed Malaysian films, the city, shown to be filled with "foreign" materialism and individualism alongside powerful "traditional" figures like Mansoor, "created such ambivalence that it was often glorified as a place of possibility" (Barnard 2005:437). At the same time, urban centers like Singapore, Jakarta, and Bangkok, standing in for regional modernity, inspired hopelessness in those who could not abide by their seeming contradictions. Invoking a similar dichotomy, the kindhearted mother-daughter duo that saves Kassim and restarts his career midway through the film appears to represent the potential for good contained in the same female power with which Mansoor is invested (tellingly, they live in a rural, *kampung* area that is implied to be a seat of more virtuous Malay values). Furthermore, neither Mansoor nor any other woman in the film are made to appear thoroughly traditional in the sense of being behind the times. From outfits to speech and mannerisms to lifestyles, women in Ramlee's film, including those in villages, constitute a mixture of local, regional, and global elements. Like Nunung in *Tiga Dara*, whose sense of style is similar, if slightly more refined, they appear at home in Malaysia's rapidly expanding urban settings, as well as in the countryside.

As in much of the rest of Southeast Asia, in peninsular Malaysia and in Java, where *Ibu Mertuaku* and *Tiga Dara* are respectively set, research over the past several decades indicates a level of gender parity that differs from that in the West. As such, like the approaches of regional cinemas, regional gender roles also distinguish themselves from traditional structures in East and South Asia.³ This parity can be attributed to a complex and changing array of factors, but women's strong financial positions within families and local market structures are a key consideration. In many areas across the region, purse strings, along with important financial decisions, are traditionally held and taken by wives and mothers. As Gloria Poedjosoedarmo writes of Javanese villages in the 1970s, for example, "economics is almost exclusively the domain of women. . . . In addition to marketing their own produce, at all levels of society women are involved in buying and selling for profit" (1983:7–8). While major shifts in the structures of urban economies and national-level socioeconomic policies from the 1950s onward challenged women's

economic positions, films like *Ibu Mertuaku* stress that the socially and financially grounded power of wives and mothers was far from diminished.

Because of their integration with and control over local markets in many parts of Southeast Asia, women also became de facto “mediators in the transcultural exchanges” that determined early stages of globalization in the region (Andaya 2007:8); many were effectively trained as modern “capitalists” through their experiences with foreign traders (including Western ones). Such experiences and the emergent status they conveyed often eluded men, especially in lower-economic strata. This also speaks to the patterns and associated abilities of women to adapt their traditional standing to engage with the kinds of changes brought on by globalization and various forms of modernization. As Barbara Andaya argues, “the market environment allowed even a ‘low-status’ woman to acquire a reputation for commercial shrewdness and organizational skills” (2007:124), potentially raising her socioeconomic standing and that of her family. Something similar would appear to be the case with Nyonya Mansoor, whose crass habits and rough manner of communication bespeak more humble origins than her opulent surrounds imply. Certainly, her shrewdness with domestic finances is portrayed as enabling her to extend her agency into political and economic circles far outside the home.

As Wazir Jahan Karim explains it, the “informal” spaces where women’s engagements with society are sanctioned are “so visible and important that . . . most political and religious activities are enacted within this . . . sphere” (1995:19). In comparison to *Tiga Dara*’s deceptively playful, entertaining take, the situation presented in *Ibu Mertuaku* stands as a more pointed example of the endurance of these quasi-informal regional patterns. Even as it begins to signal a degree of masculine doubt, Ramlee’s film helps to concretize the expansive influence of female domestic power that I argue is also behind Nunung’s reluctance to marry “on time” in *Tiga Dara*. Unlike Sabariah, the death of Nunung’s mother has turned her into a special kind of matriarch: she is given access to the power afforded by wifehood and motherhood without the stress and strain involved in marriage and child-rearing. Similar to Nyonya Mansoor’s attitude toward Kassim’s youthful career as a pop musician, Nunung finds the parties to which her sisters drag her in hopes of meeting men to be beneath the maturity and dignity that comes with her assumed position. “They all think I’m their auntie,” she complains. While on one level self-deprecating, her comments also imply that her authority is real enough to make youthful partiers, who in fact aren’t far from Nunung’s age, uncomfortable in her presence.

Belying her motherly gravitas, however, Nunung is still young and is a far more multifaceted and sympathetic figure than Nyonya Mansoor.⁴ In a scene where her grandmother arranges a party to show her off for her father’s office mates, who are supposedly eligible bachelors, Nunung allows a different side of herself to shine. She does so not in the interest of finding a husband (the party’s secret purpose, which has been kept from Nunung) but as the home’s hostess and would-be

matriarch. At the guests' request, Nunung sits down at the piano, where she displays her own ability to mix and match global and local sounds and rhythms. Using the keys to accompany a vocal melody that recalls *keroncong*, a hybrid adaptation of Portuguese *fado* that typically accompanied stambul performances, her playing and singing entrances her onlookers. In classical regional vernacular modernist form, the music's fluid style also brings to mind Malay-ized vocal jazz records by contemporary groups like the Medan, Sumatra-based Orkes Tropicana. The result, while somewhat more mature-sounding than the youthful songs at some of Nunung's sisters' parties, shows Nunung's gift for entertaining, rivaling the modern-boy tactics of P. Ramlee. But unlike Kassim in *Ibu Mertuaku*, Nunung is not easily seduced, and she performs with a confidence, poise, and class grounded in the established agency of the home. As the scene shows, she deftly turns the domestic space into something quintessentially regional-modern: a temporally and culturally dynamic stage with herself at its center.

The patterns of gazing triggered by Nunung's performance also bear closely on the film's formal bricolage and exposition of breaks and continuities in regional structures of gender and power. Building on previous scenes, the party showcases how the organization of domestic space in particular enables the women's voyeuristic evaluation of their male guests. While Nunung's performance draws the stares of guests and camera alike, this "male gaze" is elicited mainly as a distraction that facilitates a more dominant, semicovert female look. As in many of Ismail's other films and those of his contemporaries, here, he carefully underscores the gazes of central female characters. A related pattern of "reversing" the male gaze is identified by David Hanan in three later Indonesian films released between 1969–1982 (2017:253–276). Anticipating these patterns, in *Tiga Dara*, the house, while decorated in a somewhat generic modern style, reveals its "traditionality" in that it seems built specifically for women's eyes. A curtain, for example, can be drawn to separate the public space for guests from private areas. This provides Nunung's sisters and grandmother a perfect vantage point from which to single out and closely scrutinize each man as he, in turn, watches Nunung at the piano, unaware that he himself is being watched. When the grandmother is handed her glasses, however, what comes into focus are similarly bespectacled men of around her own age. "God forgive us!" she exclaims. "They're all toothless . . . with one foot in the grave!" To comedic effect and much to the women's dismay, there are no eligible bachelors in sight (fig. 13).

For her part, Nunung appears unaffected by her guests' lack of eligibility: regardless of age, their presence has allowed her to assume a more public facet of her role as "mother"—that of domestic/public entertainer and master of the typical "matrifocal home." As in Malay society, and unlike most Western family dwellings, Rahmat writes, the matrifocal home "has not been privatized and culturally isolated" (2020:86) and remains profoundly interconnected with the workings of society at large. Anticipating *Ibu Mertuaku*, in *Tiga Dara* women are the gatekeepers of the hybrid public/private family home. This begins with their control



FIGURE 13. Nunung sings for a group of appreciative elderly male guests (*top left*) while her grandmother and sisters peek out at the scene. The men watch Nunung, but the emphasis is on the evaluative gaze that the women turn on them, one that soon becomes mocking and satirical.

over who enters and exits and continues with their charge of mobility within the house. From the opening scene, where the “invisible hand” of tradition prevents Herman from following the girls out of the parlor (see chapter 2), to the party scene described above, *Tiga Dara* has likewise underscored that “movement across domestic space is most enjoyed and expressed by women rather than men” (Rahmat 2020:97). The film’s camera angles, blocking, dialogue, and story also continually show Nunung’s father as the most passive character—a man whose narrative interventions and even physicality (the latter mainly due to camera angles) are visibly diminished by the women surrounding him.

In *Ibu Mertuaku*, the contrast in men’s and women’s engagement with the matri-focal home, and with society at large through the home, is starker still. Male elders are excised completely from the film’s world, and Kassim, while initially penetrating family spaces via the radio, is soon punished for his transgressions. After his deceptively empowered opening scenes, he is consistently positioned outside of, or in tension with, female structures of authority (including the physical forms of houses they occupy) that so profoundly inflect the modern. For Rahmat, this leaves Kassim in a state of “homelessness to be contrasted against the matrifocal ‘home’ where his identity is both unsettled and questioned and, thus, decided”

(94). Those who command domestic spaces increasingly act on and alienate Kassim, ultimately governing his fate in society at large; thus, the feminized home transcends its ostensibly private status “to become the space where history in the final instance is determined” (94). Like the girls’ father in *Tiga Dara*, even the young doctor who takes Kassim’s place is shown passively carrying out the plans of Nyonya Mansoor, his power authorized by his moving into a domestic space dominated by its female inhabitants.

VISUALITY, DUALITY, AND BLINDNESS

One important question that is raised by both *Tiga Dara* and *Ibu Mertuaku* is how to *show* this complex web of gender relations that shapes regional modernity but contradicts “constitutive” global modern patterns of behavior. To further complicate things, Western modes of seeing via overdetermined masculine gazes are at times also held up as ideals by Southeast Asians. The associated problem of visibility—of representation of what is experientially real but difficult for some to see and thus to accept or believe—transcends the arena of cinema. Scholars of Southeast Asia, particularly those who study gender and agency, find themselves grappling with the power of suggestion expressed by grand narratives regarding the nature of global modernity. For Malaysian scholar Wazir Jahan Karim, “part of the problem . . . is that [Western] social scientists tend to see male dominance in religious and political life as ‘traditional’ and ‘customary’” (1995:27), leading to theories that minimize by default the influence of women’s domestic or “private” activities. The assumed alliance of tradition and male authority leads to the view that Western-style modernity, with its neopatriarchal values and emergent feminist perspectives premised on countering them, can function to disrupt the kinds of “traditional binarisms” around gender that Miriam Hansen and others see in East Asian films—albeit often in ways that are beset by modernity’s “paradoxes” and are hence destined to fail (Hansen 2000:16).

Indeed, there is much evidence to indicate that this is the case in the West and far beyond, providing more fuel for the fire of scholarly assumptions. The stark differences that define much of Southeast Asia, furthermore, are not simply a limited effect of processes of decolonization and national development that happened half a century ago. In her recent *Gender in Southeast Asia*, Mina Roces echoes earlier takes like Karim’s, arguing that “Southeast Asian concepts of power empower women in ways that are not possible in Western societies” (2022:2). Along with all the other problems addressed by regional filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s, the issue of how to make visible a modern regime of gender and power that from various “universal” perspectives appears impossible emerges as especially pressing. Across the films I review in this chapter, and many other films as well, the question of how to show, and also to *see*, these ostensibly untenable power relations becomes a major source of formal and dramatic tension. I argue that representing