Historical Films and the Asian Nations: Struggles for Independence and Emancipation – a Gendered Perspective

Wan Aida Wan Yahaya

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

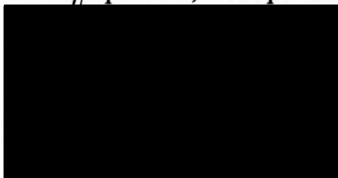
This thesis explores in detail fourteen historical films about Asian nations, most made by indigenous production companies and directors from the countries depicted in the films. The thesis has concentrated on films from Southeast Asia, but includes extensive discussion of two films made about Indian history and of two films made about Japanese history. The thesis concentrates on films concerned with issues of national independence, the period of the formation of the nation, and with women's emancipation and women's rights to self-determination. One reason for the selection of these topics is that these topics are quite common concerns in historical films made in Asian countries, particularly in the Southeast Asian region, which is the main focus of the study, and which is a region where many countries were colonised, at least from the nineteenth century onwards. In addressing the topic of the historical film, a number of concerns have figured prominently. A primary concern raised by the thesis is the question of the adequacy of historical films to the representation of the modern history of some of the nations under discussion. This has led into discussions of how the films represent national struggles, but also how they are discourses engaging with their societies at the time the film was made, and in what ways these films end up supporting or challenging hegemonic views of the nation.

The discussion of films about the periods of the national struggle for independence is mainly explored in relation to films about Indian and Malaysian history, in chapters in the first half of the thesis. The second half of the thesis is concerned with the representation of women in history, particularly in struggles for

freedom from an oppressive patriarchy, in struggles for women's rights, for emancipation generally and for education. While most of the thesis discusses historical films made about situations in history post 1880, one chapter in the thesis (Chapter Four, Representation of Women in Historical Films about Early Modern Southeast Asia) deals with periods as far back as the fifteenth century. The division of the thesis, in such a way as to spend half of the thesis on the representation of women in historical films, is in accord with priorities in relatively recent Asian historical films, and with my own concern to ensure that women are seen as part of history. The thesis also includes a discussion of the different forms that historical films can take, and how this is often determined by the kinds of historical knowledge and of historical documentation that are available from different periods.

Statement

I hereby declare that this thesis does not contain any material that has been submitted for any other degree or diploma in any university or institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.



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Chapter One

Introduction to the Research

Background

This thesis has arisen out of my interest in the Malaysian historical film and its context within historical films in Southeast Asian cinema generally. In Europe and the USA, the historical film had emerged relatively early in the twentieth century. In Italy we have the beginning of the sword and sandal epics with productions such as Giovanni Pastrone's *The Fall of Troy* (1910) and *Cabiria* (1914). In the USA in 1915 D.W. Griffith produced the epic *Birth of a Nation* with its background of the American civil war, and this was followed shortly afterwards by *Intolerance* (1916) with stories from the present intercut with stories from three major epochs within history. To mention some other examples, in France, Abel Gance produced his remarkable three-screen *Napoleon* in 1927 and in 1938 Jean Renoir produced his stirring *La Marseillaise*, about ordinary people's involvement in the early phases of the French revolution. In Britain there had been films about English kings, notably *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), though this film, as its title implies, takes an intimate and personal look at the English king rather than exploring his historical role. In the Soviet Union in the 1930s Lenfilm in Leningrad (formerly Saint Petersburg) produced Vladimir Petrov's *Peter the First, Parts I and II* (1937 and 1938) and Mosfilm in Moscow produced Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*

(1938). In the 1940s, Eisenstein wrote and directed two parts of his planned three-part *Ivan the Terrible* (1944 and 1958). All of these films depict (with varying degrees of historical accuracy and historical and stylistic invention) moments in their respective societies, which had already become part of the legend of the origins of their society, and about which there was already much discourse, imagery, stories and incomplete histories. Some of these films presented the exploits of actual historical figures, others used a particular historical period as background to a story that represented the conditions of life in the society in so far as they could be ascertained, or in so far as the conditions represented had some interest or message for the present.

But in Southeast Asia, much of which had been colonised for a century or more by a Western power, the making of historical films of any scale only began to occur in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Although in Indonesia in 1950 and 1951 Usmar Ismail produced films about the very recent past, the struggle for independence against the Dutch, featuring events that had occurred only one or two years before the films were made, it was only with the production of Teguh Karya's *November 1828*, completed in 1979, that a large scale epic film, about the distant past, requiring resourcefulness in costume design and setting, was produced in Indonesia. The production of Teguh Karya's *November 1828* undoubtedly encouraged the making of further large scale historical films in Indonesia, notably Sjuman Djaya's *Raden Ajeng Kartini* (1983) a film biography of the Javanese women's emancipationist Kartini, and Eros Djarot's *Tjoet Nja Dhien* (1988) about a woman who led a band of guerrillas against the Dutch colonising Aceh at the end of the nineteenth century. In Malaysia, historical films emerged even later and their

production has been sporadic, though there were minor efforts in the early 1980s. Indeed even in India, prior to the production by Richard Attenborough's international co-production *Gandhi* (1982), filmed on location in India, there had been no realistic productions of historical epics (of the kind pioneered by David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)), despite the size of its film industry, though Attenborough's *Gandhi* did stimulate an interest in this kind of film in India.

There are a number of explanations for the relative lateness in the emergence of historical films in Southeast Asia. One is that prior to the late 1940s or the mid 1950s, these nations did not exist, and the production of historical films is an endeavour usually (though not always) consequent upon the formation of a nation. Another is that film industries within newly emerging nations rarely have the resources to embark on expensive quality projects that have the production values normally associated with historical films. Indeed, in Indonesia, films were only shot in colour from 1969 onwards. In Malaysia, a really expensive period film was only produced in 2004, with the production of *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, and although based on legends contained within the Malay annals, an important written account of life in the Malay Peninsula in the sixteenth century, this was really a fantasy film, using numerous trick effects. There are more substantial films dealing with actual history produced in Malaysia, but they have all been made with lower production budgets, and most of them deal with Malaysia in the period just before or just after the achievement of independence.

In turn, the production of historical films in Thailand has been limited. One reason is that although Thailand was never colonised, after World War II the film

industry produced mainly films cheaply made on 16mm until as late as the early 1970s, a fact that appears less remarkable when one remembers that in Australia, from early in World War II, Australia produced hardly any locally produced feature films until the 1970s, although there had been a 35mm industry in the 1930s. Nevertheless, in Thailand in 1993 the internationally acclaimed Thai director, Cherd Songsri, made a realistic film set in mid nineteenth century Thailand, based on some brief court records. And Malaysia's *Puteri Gunung Ledang* was inspired by an even more expensive and ambitious Thai production, *Suriyothai* (2001), written and directed by the leading Thai director Chatri Chalerm Yukol, who had been making crime dramas and melodramas of social relevance from the 1970s onwards. Chatri Chalerm Yukol is a great-grandson of the nineteenth century reforming Thai King, Rama V, and Prince Chatri's historical film about the fifteenth century Thai queen Suriyothai received a large amount of funding from the present Thai queen, and subsequently was promoted internationally in a shortened form by Francis Ford Coppola.[1]

Given the relatively recent emergence of historical films in Southeast Asia, it is not surprising that very little research has been undertaken on them. A strange fact is that although there is a polemical book written about Attenborough's *Gandhi*, there is very little scholarly discussion of this film.[2] Despite its popular acclaim and

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[1] The initial version of the film entitled *Suriyothai*, with a running time of 185 minutes was released in 2001. The film was intended as an eight-hour length film but a five-hour version was released on DVD. With the international release of the film in 2003, edited by Francis Ford Coppola, the film was retitled *The Legend of Suriyothai*. The study employs this international version of the film later in its discussion.

[2] The polemical book mentioned above refers to: Markovits, Claude. *The Un-Gandhian Gandhi: The Life and Afterlife of the Mahatma*. London: Anthem Press, 2003.

high profile, even while selective and partial in its approach, it is a historical biographical film that excels almost all other historical films in a number of respects. Its narrative runs for 191 minutes and spans nearly fifty-five years. An immense number of pertinent details of history, mostly in their sequential order, are used to dramatise Gandhi's role in developing the policy of non-violent non-cooperation and civil disobedience as one way of getting the British to reconsider their position as colonisers of India. The introductory title at the beginning of the film, makes the point that "No mans life can be encompassed in one telling." To some extent *Gandhi* is a test case for how adequate a film that contains a large number of dramatised reconstructions of actual historical events can be to history itself.

After a discussion of Attenborough's film and a later Indian historical epic broadly dealing with the same period, the main project of this thesis is to start to establish initial terms for the discussion of some of the more important historical films made in South and Southeast Asia. By discussing primarily Southeast Asian films, but bringing in examples of some films made outside of Southeast Asia, mainly from Japan, the study develops a comparative context, particularly in the matter of the representation of women in history. One of the interesting facts of the emergence of the Southeast Asian historical film is that quite a few of them have been about women in history, so that when the Melbourne International Film Festival screened a small retrospective of Indonesian films about women, in 1987, three of these films were historical films about women.

The Research – A Preliminary Statement

This research is an exploration of Asian historical films, particularly Southeast Asian historical films, examining their main discourses and structural features. Although the thesis is not a survey, the study encompasses seventy percent of the major historical films made in Malaysia up until 2007, half of the major historical films made in Indonesia before 2005, and the two most important Thai historical films made until 2005. It develops terms for discussing these films and the nature of their engagement with history. It sets them in a comparative context with some other key historical films made about Asian societies, the majority of these films being films made by Asian directors, two of these films being made in Japan, and the other being made in India. The study does however bring in at the beginning and discuss at length British director, Richard Attenborough's international co-production, *Gandhi*, as a key point of reference in the discussion of historical films, for this film, whatever its limitations, does represent a major attempt to engage with a very complex period of actual history. It was also undoubtedly a major influence on the other film about India discussed in this study, Ketan Mehta's *Sardar*.

These two films, together with Sjuman Djaya's *Raden Ajeng Kartini* are examples of significant attempts to narrate eras in modern history which are complex and about which there are numerous records. These films are key examples of works which do not simply tell a fictional if representative story set against a specific historical background, their main characters are figures from history as well, a complex modern history that is relatively well documented. In this sense neither the terms "biopic" nor "historical spectacular" do them justice. Part of the aim of this

research is to find terms for accounting for different kinds of historical films, for detailed study of a set of historical films reveals that the genre is very various, depending on the degree of documentation of the period in which they are set and of the characters whose stories they narrate. The historical film also depends on the mode of history-telling adopted by the filmmakers and the degree of license with which they treat history. A second feature of this study is that instead of concentrating on films that are primarily concerned with histories in which males are the major protagonists, half of this thesis explores films in which women are its leading characters. This was necessary because a very large proportion of quality historical films made in Indonesia and Thailand have had women as their central protagonists. It was necessary to develop terms to discuss these films and to discuss them in a sufficiently wide historical context. Additionally, a major issue in Film Studies over the last thirty-five years has been the critique of the representation of women in mainstream cinema, and particularly the issue raised by Laura Mulvey that frequently women are presented in film as the passive object of the male gaze, who do not forward the action of the narrative, which is usually left to the male.[3] However, in films about women as protagonists in history the women as the central characters inevitably must have a different kind of agency from that described by Mulvey. As the study has progressed, the appropriateness of the decision to divide the study equally between films with males and females as central protagonists has become increasingly apparent, for it leads to a more pervasive awareness of the

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[3] Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989. 14-26.

different situations faced by the protagonists in what I call the "male historical" film and the "female historical" film.

While I am aware that there will always be objections to the exact ways a particular film represents particular historical events, I am committed to the view that historical films are important. The historical film presents an inevitable feature of the modern state and suggests a way of narrating itself. Thus, with specific reference to the nations' struggle for independence and emancipation, this thesis investigates the role of the historical film in representing the history of a number of Asian nations from a gendered perspective. Questions I address in this study include the following: Are the Asian historical films explored in this study adequate to the history they represent? Why was it important that a particular history be told in a film, and how did the telling of that history contribute to contemporary discourses in the society in which the film was made? What is meant by the female historical film? Are there different kinds of female historical films, at least within the Asian context? Are the theoretical terms used in Film Studies, generally, with reference to historical films made in first world countries (concepts of genre, notions of narrative, ideas of the nation), fully adequate to account for historical films made in the nations of Southeast Asia?

Chapterisation

In this introductory chapter, I lay out the ground and terms of reference of my investigation. In addition to providing a detailed summary of my chapterisation, designed to further explain the nature of the project, in this chapter I summarise the theoretical literature on the historical film as genre; give an exposition of post colonial debates about the concept of “the nation” and “national ideologies”, so relevant to historical films, which often are made with some sense of national history in mind; outline debates about aspects of the representation of the male, and of the woman, particularly in the woman’s film; and finally, give an account of the history writing and the Historical Studies (and debates within Historical Studies) that I have used in exploring the selected films.

In Chapter Two, the first chapter examining films in detail, I conduct an investigation of Richard Attenborough’s award winning international co-production, *Gandhi*, in terms of its adequacy as history and in terms of how it conceptualises and presents its central figure. But in doing so I also explore in similar detail and depth, and with a concern for similar issues, particularly its adequacy as history, an Indian film about the period of struggle for independence in India, a struggle that extended over many decades. The Indian produced film is Ketan Mehta’s *Sardar*, a film that went into production some ten years after *Gandhi* was completed, and which was undoubtedly influenced, both in scope and approach, by Attenborough’s film, but which develops an Indian perspective on the independence period. This film focuses particularly on the final stages of negotiations with the British over the three-year period (1945 to 1947) leading to independence in August 1947. However, this film

also includes in its narrative, major sections dealing with earlier periods, extending from as early as 1916.

The reason for developing this strategic comparison between these two films about the struggle for independence in colonised India is that my initial and primary concern is with film as history, and how adequately a feature film can represent the historical past, as history rather than as fiction. This is a question that a screenwriter developing a screenplay for an historical feature film, or a television docudrama about historical events, is asking all the time. But even in the context of Film Studies and of Post-Colonial Studies, the question as to how a nation is constructed in a film, television series or a novel, is an issue of major theoretical concern. These concerns include questions as whether or not there are hegemonic discourses of the nation at work in the text, and related questions of historical absences in a text that allow for the generation or reiteration of foundation myths of the nation that are really an ideology of a dominant class.

The film *Gandhi* is a test case in this issue, for few historical films attempt to deal in a realistic manner with a period as complex as this, with so many interrelated historical forces, countries, events, personalities and phases of history over a period of time, involved. But despite being a high profile or well known historical film, there has been very little detailed discussion of Attenborough's *Gandhi*, as history, partly perhaps because the history itself is difficult to adequately master. But there is also the question of an Indian approach to the same topic, which can be explored by a study of Ketan Mehta's film, a film which in its epic proportions, running time, and sense of the complexity of historical events, certainly bears comparison with

Attenborough's film (whatever objections can be raised about both of these films) but which is little known outside of India. Another priority in my discussion, is not only the adequacy of these films as history, but, as raised in my preliminary statement, also the kinds of contemporary discourses these films were designed to generate about the history they depicted. This also is an issue about which a screenwriter needs to be aware.

A study of these two films about India as an opening move in a discussion of Southeast Asian historical films is appropriate because both films are about colonialism and the period of the ending of colonialism in Asia, a major turning point and watershed in the history of Asia. Themes of colonialism and opposition to colonialism are themes that dominate, though not entirely, historical films made in Southeast Asia. Most Southeast Asian countries, with the notable exception of Thailand, which undertook careful diplomacy to make sure this did not occur, were colonised by European countries from at least the mid nineteenth century on, and in some cases earlier. Malaysia, Singapore and Burma were colonised by the British from the mid nineteenth century; Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were colonised by the French also from the mid nineteenth century; and Indonesia was colonised by the Dutch from about 1814 onwards, though in fact for two hundred years prior to this the Indonesian archipelago had been subject to the invasive presence of the Dutch East India company, a trading company that assembled and deployed its own private armies and played a role in local politics. (It should be noted that there had been Spanish colonies in the Philippines even earlier on, from the mid sixteenth century). It is difficult to narrate history in Indonesia for a 450-year period, from the early seventeenth century onwards, without some reference to the Dutch presence. A

further reason for commencing this study with a lengthy examination of films about the Indian struggle for independence is that Gandhi and his colleagues involved in the Indian struggle were a major influence on independence movements emerging in Southeast Asia from the mid 1920s.

In my third chapter I examine Malaysian films set within a narrower but similar period, films concerned with aspects of the end of colonialism in Malaya in the period from the mid 1930s to the late 1950s. The end of colonialism in Malaysia was not precipitated by a lengthy independence struggle led for thirty years or more by charismatic leaders, as occurred in India, but by a number of interrelated factors. Firstly, the Japanese drive into Southeast Asia at the end of 1941 destabilised the European colonial regimes dominating numerous Southeast Asian countries and indeed the British were driven out of Malaya and Burma, and the Dutch out of Indonesia. According to Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, the period of Japanese occupation was a critical event in the making of Malaysia.[4] While the representatives of the colonial regimes and their military forces, began to return towards the end of 1945 with some expectation of regaining control of these colonies, by this time the independence movement in India was having an international impact and exacting concessions from the British Labour government, especially regarding a time frame for the achievement of independence. Additionally, the Atlantic Charter, signed by both Roosevelt and Churchill in August 1941, had

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[4] Andaya, Barbara Watson and Andaya, Leonard Y. "Negotiating a New Nation, 1942-69." *A History of Malaysia.* 2nd Ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001. 256.

adopted the principles of self-determination and an end to colonialism, and elites within the colonised countries were aware of this.[5]

Decolonisation from Britain within the Malay Peninsula took some time, with independence only being finally achieved in 1957, but it was primarily a matter of protracted negotiations with the British. In the meantime there had been the Malayan Emergency where British forces were deployed from 1948 onwards to counter a perceived threat from communism, the Communist Party of Malaya being largely comprised of Chinese who had taken to the jungle in early 1942 in order to oppose the occupying Japanese forces, and had decided to continue the struggle against occupation by foreign powers at the time of the British return in 1945. While the historical films about the struggle for independence in India deal with a thirty year struggle by a persuasive intellectual elite, who mobilised the Indian masses, the films about the period of independence in Malaysia that I examine here, particularly the earlier of the films produced, deal with the lead up to World War II. The films address the formation by the British of Malayan armed forces to work in unison with the British, their struggle against the Japanese in World War II, and later the struggle against the communist “menace” in the post war period. More recently, since 2003, however, there have been films about the Japanese occupation itself, and its effect on Malayan society, a society broadly comprising three racial groups: the indigenous Malays; Indians, mainly from Southern India; and the Chinese. Both Indians and Chinese had had some involvement in Malaya and Malay society even prior to the arrival of the British, and the imposition of colonialism. The Indians and Chinese had

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[5] For further reading, refer to: Brinkley, Douglas and Facey-Crowther, David R. *The Atlantic Charter*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994.

since the fifteenth century and earlier been involved in trade with Malay society, especially through the trading port of Malacca, which was also the centre of an important sultanate.[6] But under British colonialism, large numbers of Indians and Chinese had been brought in to Malaya by the British to work in specifically designated industries: the Indians on British owned rubber plantations, and the Chinese in British owned tin mines (but also to facilitate trade, in which they had specialised for centuries). By the beginning of World War II, Malaya was a divided multi-racial society.

Unlike the two Indian films examined in Chapter Two, the Malay historical films are not so closely linked to successive historical events, in the way the two Indian films are linked to the multiple details of the on-going independence struggle, and few of them deal in detail with the political careers of elite leaders. Some of the Malaysian films deal with historical figures, but even here the characters at the centre of the films are minor figures in history. For example, Lieutenant Adnan, the hero of the film of the same name, is simply an honourable Malay soldier who is decorated for his skills by the British king in the late 1930s, and proves his courage in a confrontation with the Japanese at the time of the fall of Singapore in February 1942. However, most of the Malaysian historical features (though not the documentary I discuss later in the chapter) have fictional characters as their major protagonists, and do not deal very much with specific known events or a sequence of known events, but use their fictional protagonists to represent the experience of a group, usually a

[6] Andaya and Andaya, “The Heritage of the Past,” and “Melaka and its Heirs.” *A History of Malaysia*. 7-78. There are varied accounts of when Chinese and Indian migrants arrived on the Malay Peninsula. However, most historians regard ‘the rise of a great entreport’, Melaka (also spelt as ‘Malacca’, as an identifiable starting point for Malay history.

racial group, within a particular period of history. Moreover, the most prominent racial group, the racial grouping at the centre of these historical films, until only recently, has been the Malays. One implication of this is that the Malaysian historical films dealing with the war and the early independence period are not so much about history as about race. Indeed it will be argued that early Malaysian historical films for almost the first fifty years of Malaysian society are primarily a discourse about race. It is only from about 2003 onwards that the presence and the role of the Chinese as a racial group in this period of the 1940s and 1950s gets any thorough examination in the Malaysian historical film. The point of my strategic comparison, in Chapter Three, of a set of Malaysian historical films made from 1957 to 2007 is to examine changing discourses about race in the Malaysian historical film.

From this point on my research takes a different direction. In Chapters Two and Three all the feature films I discuss (with the exception of one) have males or a group of males as their central protagonists. But this thesis takes a gendered perspective. Noting that the most important Thai historical feature film ever produced, Chatri Chalerm Yukol's *Suriyothai* had as its central, framing character, a woman, as well as, at least one other important Thai feature film about a woman in history, and that at least half of the important historical films made in Indonesia took a woman as their central character, I decided to organise my discussion around a balanced examination of male historical films and female historical films, particularly given the numerous theoretical debates emerging from within feminist film theory about the representation of women in cinema, as briefly outlined earlier. A further reason for deciding to prioritise a comparison of gender in history, is that in none of the films about the struggle for independence in India – and in only one of

the films about the end of colonialism in Malaysia – is a woman given a significant role as an agent of history.

In Chapter Four, therefore, my strategic comparison is one between three films made about women in historical situations in Indonesia and Thailand in the early modern or feudal period. The films discussed here, *The Legend of Suriyothai* (set in fifteenth century Thailand), *Roro Mendut* (set in Central Java in the seventeenth century) and *Muen and Rid* (set in mid nineteenth century Thailand) – all of which take their titles from the names of the central characters – all deal in a more or less realistic way with the experiences of women in a particular period of time when the rights of women were limited. For example, at the very least their circumstances were not mediated by the rights accorded to citizens in contemporary democracies, nor in evolving societies with some expectation that these rights would be granted or could be struggled for and demanded. In most of these films, though not all, the women are regarded as subject to the men in their families or to the power of dominant males in some way or other. All of these films discussed in Chapter Four have been made in the last thirty years, and all display a positive concern with ways in which a woman may find a way out of those circumstances that constrict them due to their particular social role or to the patriarchal attitudes of those who control their societies. In other words, they are films about female ingenuity and creativity and how these women transform their social conditions. Yet, while these are films about women attempting to emancipate themselves, at least for a time, within what are basically feudal societies, they are also films that share certain similar features. For example, two of the three of these films are to some extent discourses about the erotic, but they are discourses about the erotic and the sensual

that differ in significant ways from the body of films discussed in the large literature on the male gaze developed by feminist film theorists in discussing films made mostly in Hollywood and the West generally.

Here, as well, a reading of recent developments in the writing of history of Southeast Asia is brought into the discussion, notably the claim put forward by Anthony Reid that a study of available primary source materials about Southeast Asia, written primarily by travellers from Europe visiting Southeast Asia in the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, suggests that historically some women in Southeast Asia, in the early modern period, were accorded both economic power and status that women in Europe and South Asia certainly did not have. This claim is qualified by the recognition that subsequent developments in Southeast Asia over the last few hundred years, particularly colonialism and the increasing influence of Islam, changed the situation of these societies, including the position of women.[7] Nevertheless, the question of how women are represented in these films about early modern Southeast Asian women is explored in light of the claims for a different kind of status for some women in early Southeast Asia made by historians.

In Chapter Five, my final chapter, I explore films made in Indonesia and Japan about women involved in struggles for women's emancipation in a period I describe as the period of the transition to the modern. This was a period when ideas of democracy and liberalism were permeating into Asian countries (both colonised Asian societies and those that were not colonised), and when a space was opened up (for example in Meiji Japan, which was strongly influenced by the West) for open

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[7] Andaya, Barbara Watson. "Introduction." *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006. 1.

political struggle in a public sphere, of a kind not experienced in the previous autocratic periods, dominated in Japan, for example, by Shogun and Emperor. At this time, as well, even feminist ideas were penetrating into colonised societies (such as Indonesia) and were more tolerated by the authorities than open anti-colonial struggles. The Japanese examples are used as part of this strategic comparison, because there are few films made outside of Indonesia in Southeast Asia that deal with the issue of women's emancipation. Studio melodramas about women emancipationists in Japan, and about women asserting themselves in ways that defied Japanese social conventions and Japanese militarism, were made by major directors (Kenji Mizoguchi and Akira Kurosawa) early in the period of the American/Allied occupation after the war. In a certain sense the struggle by women for emancipation and for women's rights generally is a struggle that parallels the struggle against colonialism in colonised countries, a struggle that is usually depicted by representing only the activities of male protagonists.

Furthermore, with this last chapter in the thesis I return also to films that depict known historical figures. Two of the films discussed in this chapter depict the lives and activities of known historical figures. Mizoguchi's melodrama *My Love is Burning* is a loose adaptation of some aspects of the life of the Japanese feminist, Hideko Fukuda, and Sjuman Djaya's almost three hour film *Raden Ajeng Kartini* narrates quite closely the life of the Javanese noblewoman. R. A. Kartini, who, before dying in childbirth at the early age of twenty-five years, founded schools in Java at the turn of the century. Kartini, whose letters to Dutch administrators and their families in the colonial capital, Batavia, and to a young feminist socialist women in Holland, were published in part in 1908, is regarded as a national heroine

in Indonesia. On the other hand, two of the films are fiction films not portraying historical figures, but either developing a story out of an historical incident in the period of Japanese fascism, and involving a woman in the incident (Kurosawa) or in the case of Asrul Sani's *Pioneers of Freedom*, developing an exemplary portrait of a woman's fight for her rights under Islamic law, and then showing her becoming an activist within the anti-colonial struggle, this portrait being a composite from a number of historical sources, designed to display major issues within the period depicted.

The issue of melodrama and the woman's film is addressed in this chapter, since the two Japanese films are melodramas or hybrids with strong melodramatic elements, but there is a question as to whether the two Indonesian films can be considered melodramas, and if not, why they should not be considered melodramas. Given that melodramas are often set within the home there is an issue as to whether an historical film is ever simply a melodrama, according to certain definitions of melodrama. But here are also issues about whether these later quite sophisticated feature films made in Indonesia and Thailand can be considered melodramas at all, including the films I discuss in Chapter Four, depicting women in early modern periods in Indonesia and Thailand.

While the number of genuine historical films made in Southeast Asia is limited, there are certainly more historical films made than are discussed in this thesis, so that it may be possible to consider other kinds of strategic comparisons other than those provided in this research. Here, I look briefly at these possibilities. For example, there are three historical epics made by Indonesian director Arifin C.

Noer in the 1980s: *Serangan Fajar* (Dawn Attack, 1981), *Pengkhianatan G.30S PKI* ("The Treachery of the Indonesian Communist Party in the Events of 30th September", 1984) and *Djakarta 1966* (1982). All of these films were produced with government funding by the state film production centre (PPFN – Pusat Produksi Film Negara), with G. Dwipayana, a member of Suharto's kitchen cabinet, as head of PPFN, effectively being the executive producer of the films.

The first of these films by Arifin C. Noer presents an exaggerated view of the role of President Suharto in the struggle for independence against the Dutch in the late 1940s, during the occupation of Yogyakarta. As Krishna Sen has argued, Suharto did play some role but the depiction of his role is inflated in the interests of justifying Suharto's increasingly hegemonic position in New Order Indonesia in the 1980s.[8] The second of the films is a slow moving, highly rhetorical, exaggerated and grimly provocative portrait of the role of the communist party in the attempted coup and massacres of 30 September 1965, an historic incident that led to the destabilisation of President Sukarno and his replacement by Suharto over the next eighteen months. The third film is about the destabilisation of Sukarno by demonstrating students and the army working together in 1966, and this film was curiously never released to the public, presumably because the regime finally realised that the widely disseminated depiction of the destabilisation of Sukarno by demonstrating students in 1966 might lead to similar action by students in Jakarta against Suharto in the mid 1980s. It is conceivable that at least some of these films might be compared with, for example the Indian films about the struggle for independence and the consolidation of the

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[8] Sen, Krishna. "Narrating the Nation."*Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order.* London: Zed Books, 1994. 83, 89-101.

Indian state, or with the various Malaysian films about the period of the Emergency, or the actions of the Malay communist party both during World War II and at its end.

The reason I have not included detailed discussion of these films in the thesis is that it is not a study of propaganda films, but of historical films, and most commentators acknowledge that these three Indonesian films were blatant propaganda. While all films carry with them ideological content which may or may not favour hegemonic groups within a society, part of the aim of this thesis is to examine the purpose and value of historical films to a society, but not when they clearly involve historical falsification to the disadvantage of certain groups within the society. Equally this thesis does not treat as historical films those films based loosely on historical documents that narrate legends, but that these legends are of a fantastic nature, involving characters with magical powers such as flying through the air, and capable of disappearing at will. This is the reason for the exclusion of the expensive Malaysian epic *Puteri Gunung Ledang* ("The Princess of Ledang Mountain", 2004), a film using numerous special effects and based loosely on a story in the Malay annals, but a film that I regard as a fantasy epic.

There are a number of films deserving of inclusion in the discussion, which have been excluded for a variety of reasons. For one thing this thesis is not a survey, and certainly not an exhaustive survey, and nor is it a catalogue. Among the films excluded are the Indonesian films *November 1828* (Teguh Karya, 1979) and *Tjoet Nja' Dhien* (Eros Djarot, 1988), both of these films being epic portraits of struggles against the Dutch in earlier periods. *November 1828* is set in the Java War, the first campaign against the Dutch, which ended in defeat in 1830; and *Tjoet Nja' Dhien* is

a portrait of a woman who led a guerrilla band in Aceh in the early twentieth century until her capture by the Dutch in 1905, and is regarded as an Indonesian national hero. *November 1828* has been discussed in two published essays, Krishna Sen arguing that the film presents a view of history that subscribes to the army-backed New Order's dominant ideologies, seeing the nation 'Indonesia' as the product of war and of a military campaign.

The film has also been discussed in detail by David Hanan who argues that it is an interesting example of a film involved in defining cultural differences, particularly in the contrast the film develops between the mixed-race Indo officers of the Dutch forces, and the Javanese villagers whose village the Dutch forces are occupying. Hanan, noting that before the film was shot the director and camera crew made a special study of Dutch group portraiture, argues that this film is distinctive in the subtlety with which it presents the pervasive group orientation of Javanese life contrasting "the body language of non-institutionalised group identity" of the Javanese, and their cooperativeness in pursuing the collective struggle, with that of the Indo and Dutch officers, who, Hanan argues, share a body language of individuals who are part of a military bureaucratic institutionalised group.[9]

A discussion of this film is not included, primarily because it has already been the subject of considerable and varied academic investigation. While the poetic and finely acted *Tjoet Nja' Dhien* is an important Indonesian historical film, a discussion of this film has not been included in the chapter on films about women in the period of the transition to the modern, even though Tjoet Nja' Dhien's campaign

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[9] Hanan, David. "Film and Cultural Difference: *November 1828.*"*Histories and Stories: Cinema in New Order Indonesia*. Ed. Krishna Sen. Clayton: Monash University, 1988. 46.

in the mountains of Aceh coincided with Kartini's short lived adult life in Jepara, for the reason that it is not a film about a woman involved in a struggle for women's rights but rather is a film about a woman involved in a war and playing the role of a commander analogous to a role that might be played by a man.

The chapters in the body of this thesis are therefore designed to focus on certain issues. Chapter Two focuses on the adequacy of the historical film to represent history, and the particular inflections of history of a nation in the accounts of the history of the same period provided by Attenborough's international co-production *Gandhi*, and Ketan Mehta's entirely Indian funded production, *Sardar*. Chapter Three focuses on changing constructions of the nation and of race in films about Malaysian history in the lead up to World War II and its aftermath. Chapter Four focuses on the representation of women in Southeast Asia in the early modern "feudal period", in films made in Indonesia and Thailand, and the combined discourses in these films of women's initiative and ingenuity in pursuing their rights in situations controlled by powerful male dominated regimes, and the different roles eroticism plays in this. Chapter Five focuses on women attempting to enter the public sphere in the period of transition to the modern, at the end of the nineteenth century, the pre World War II period, and its aftermath.

Critical Survey of the Literature on the Historical Film as a Genre

Discussions of the historical film as genre range from the cursory and even the superficial to the exploratory. Discussions of genre are usually initiated with reference to Hollywood, or by using a variety of Hollywood films as the model. A

key text in this regard is Steve Neale's book *Genre and Hollywood*. In this book Neale discusses the historical film primarily under two rubrics: the 'biopic' and 'epics and spectacles'. Neale defines the latter in the following way:

> 'Epic' is essentially a 1950s and 1960s term. It was used to identify, and to sell, two overlapping contemporary trends: films with historical, especially ancient-world settings and large-scale films of all kinds which used new technologies, high production values and special modes of distribution and exhibition to differentiate themselves both from routine productions and from alternative forms of contemporary entertainment, especially television. As such there were at least two aspects to epics, two sets of distinguishing characteristics: those associated with ancient and historical films, and those associated with large-scale films. These two aspects normally coincided, as was true of *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* and *How the West Was Won* (1962), and even of films with more recent historical settings like *The Longest Day* (1962) and *The Battle of the Bulge* (1965). But the production and special circulation of large-scale comedies like *The Great Race* (1965) and large-scale musicals like *South Pacific* (1958) and the production of more routinely scaled and circulated ancient-world films like *Helen of Troy* (1955) and *Hannibal* (1960) show that this was by no means always the case.[10]

We should note that Neale's approach to genre is primarily industrial and his model of the industry is Hollywood. Neale's book provides an exhaustive taxonomy of genres and sub-genres, as they are understood in Hollywood. Correctly he points out

[10] Neale, Steve. "Major Genres: Biopics." *Genre and Hollywood.* London: Routledge, 2000. 78.

that the notions of epic and spectacle are terms very much used in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when Hollywood had moved consistently to use colour and wide screen, and when productions could be more lavishly mounted compared with what was possible in the technically more impoverished 1930s and the war economies of the 1940s. But the sort of epics and spectacles he writes about (*Ben Hur* and *Spartacus*) are particularly typical of Hollywood: they are films made by a powerful industrial group about the ancient history of a country that is not the USA, namely Italy.

In the case of the films I am writing about, all except *Gandhi* are films made by a person who is a citizen of the country the history of which is being represented, and of which that person is to some extent proud, and where the particular history has some meaning to him (or her), other than the possibility of making an historical spectacle which might succeed at the box office, or of making an artistic work. But we should note that Hollywood, as part of the United States of America, is part of a settler society, whose foundations go back only a few hundred years. One question we may ask in this thesis is whether Hollywood genres or the genres of any society which is a settler society are adequate to older societies that have stories and performance traditions going back a very long time. In similar fashion we may ask if in these countries "genre" should be discussed primarily as an industrial term. In Chapter Four, I discuss the Indonesian film *Roro Mendut*, which is set in a historically specific period in Java (the seventeenth century Mataram Empire), a milieu and period that are realistically recreated in the film, but the story told in the film is a legend or a folktale.

In a similar vein, much of the other circulating discussion of historical genres tends to see cinema in terms of Hollywood and its particular "take" on history. Susan Hayward in her book *Cinema Studies: the Key Concepts*, in giving a glossary definition of the historical epic suggests that historical epics denote films that are of monumental cost and require huge sets, casts of thousands and above all, a monumental hero played by a monumental star. Hayward adds that the subject matter of the epic is often taken from history in terms of biblical or 'factual' stories. These stories are considered from "a distant past so that the ideological message of national greatness would pass unremittingly."[11] Hayward believes that the appeal of the historical epic is the grandeur of the themes based on heroic action and moral values that feed into the dominant cultural practices of the time. Examples cited by Hayward are almost the same as cited by Neale, the popular Hollywood historical epics *Ben Hur* (1959) and *Cleopatra* (1963), the grandeur of which (in terms of set and cast) for Hayward is designed to illustrate the greatness of the hero/heroine of an ancient time.

However, I believe that the terms *grandeur* and *monumental* form the basis of differentiation between the epic and the historical films discussed within this research. The historical film does not necessarily have to be grand in its representation of a nation's history, in a developing society (where film budgets are limited and there are unlikely to be returns from international sales); what is important in such a film is that the historical events depicted are significant in the history of that society. The nature of the Hollywood epic is very much determined by Hollywood and the USA's penetration and domination of the world economy and the

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[11] Hayward, Susan. "H." *Cinema Studies: the Key Concepts.* 2nd Ed. London: Routledge, 2000. 103.

film industries of other countries. While Hayward believes that authenticity in a film's *mise-en-scene* (settings, costumes, objects, the use of colour and details) is a must, in a developing society, the representation of the significant events within the emerging nation's history based on 'factual' events or people is much more critical.

The other term discussed by Neale, relevant to the historical film, is the 'biopic'. Neale's discussion of the 'biopic' is almost entirely based on an earlier book by George Custen, who defines the biopic as simply a biographical film "which depicts the life of a historical person, past or present."[12] Custen draws attention to the limitations of the biopic as a Hollywood genre, claiming that it has been highly selective in the topics and historical figures about whom biopics are made, concentrating on certain professions, on men in history rather than on women, and limited in its range of historical settings. Only twenty percent of biopics centre on women, "and of these the majority are entertainers, members of royalty, 'paramours', and members of caring professions like medicine."[13] While biopics made by Hollywood in the 1930s concentrated on figures associated with royalty, government and politics, those after the war tend to be dominated by figures from the world of entertainment. Here, Custen notes that this change suggests a change in address to spectators as citizens, to an audience after the war of "consumers of popular culture".

In Hollywood films in these periods were controlled ultimately by their producers rather than by a writer-director. Custen cites the case of producer Darryl Zanuck whose memo on the biopic on the life of the inventor of the telephone,

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[12] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* 60. Steve Neale considers George Custen's, *Bio/Pics* (1992) as 'the only book-length study to date of the biopic'.

[13] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* 60.

Alexander Graeme Bell, insisted that the central drama in the film was to be not so much the invention of the telephone, but Bell's "fight against the world that he had something great."[14] Generally the Hollywood biopic tended to conform to certain studio preferred ideological and dramatic patterns, one of which was the struggle between the innovative individual and established institutions. By and large, the Hollywood biopic did not show the whole life of an individual, but started *in medias res*. This resulted in a tighter dramatic structure focusing on crucial events in a context of causality and influence, but this limited the role of the family in the life of the historical individual. [15]

Very few films discussed in this thesis conform to such a model of the 'biopic', the closest being the two Japanese studio films discussed in Chapter Five, one of which has a fictional character at its centre though it draws on historic events. Many of the Indonesian and Thai films were made under the control of respected writer-directors (Sjuman Djaya, Asrul Sani and Cherd Songsri), not working in a studio system but for a production company sympathetic to their aims. Chatri Chalerm Yukol was the writer and director of *Suriyothai*, and the film was made for his own production company. Although Richard Attenborough was not the writer of *Gandhi*, he was its producer and only commenced shooting the film when he was satisfied with the script. The Indonesian biographical film *Raden Ajeng Kartini* depicts the whole of its subject's life, from the moment of birth to death. Three of the other films discussed show almost the whole of the adult life of their characters, however compressed some stages of these lives are.

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[14] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* 61-62.

[15] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* 62.

David Bordwell and Kirstin Thompson, on the other hand, are not so anxious to define the historical film only in industrial terms. They define the historical film in terms of its relation to history, seeing it as requiring at least a context of elements that refer to 'real' history, but suggest that there is a distinction between the historical film and a documentary.[16] The historical film often takes the form of real public events or at least those private events found in biographies. Bordwell and Thompson draw on *Apollo 13* (1995) and *Schindler's List* (1993) as examples of historical films based on actual events, and films like *Malcolm X* (1992) and *Nixon* (1995) as biopics because they trace episodes in the lives of people who really existed. Bordwell and Thompson suggest that most historical films add purely make-believe characters, speeches or actions, and remain fictional (rather than factual) films, according to the broad classifications as to how films are produced, for events within these films are wholly staged, and the historical agents are portrayed through the actors' performances.[17] Bordwell and Thompson believe that, similar to plays or novels based on real-life events, historical and biographical films convey ideas about history by means of fictional portrayal.[18]

While Neale, Hayward, Bordwell and Thompson provide accounts of the historical films in terms well known within Film Studies discourse, there are other scholars who aim to provide a specialist understanding of the historical film, notably Pierre Sorlin and Marcia Landy. Marcia Landy suggests that the nature of popular

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[16] Bordwell, David and Thompson, Kirstin. "Documentary, Experimental and Animated Films." *Film Art: an Introduction*. 7th Ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004. 131.

[17] Further discussion of the issue of adaptation of factual material into what is ultimately a fictional work is found in Desmond, John M. and Hawkes, Peter. Eds. "Nonfiction." *Adaptation: Studying Film and Literature.* Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006. 188.

[18] Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: an Introduction*. 131.

history is multilayered and hybrid. Landy focuses on the uses of the past, as well as the nature and role of history and memory as she argues that there are various differences and problems in understanding the past with regards to its meaning and its importance. Starting from the works of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, Landy refers to the three dominant forms of historical construction as outlined by Nietzsche – the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical:

> Monumental history is “an engagement with the classic and rare of earlier times…the greatness that once existed.”…Monumental history as purveyed in the cinema has certain defining characteristics. In its uses of narrative it relies on a vision of the past during moment of crisis and heroic conflict, and it reveals a penchant for the actions of heroic figures, such as Napoleon, Elizabeth I, Rembrandt, and Louis Pasteur. These figures come to define an age, and their actions are considered as models to be emulated. While unique, they are not isolated from the moral and social climate of their times; to the contrary, they are inseparably integrated into their era. [19]

For Landy, monumental history is based on history that has been documented, usually in text form and refers to critical events within the period of a heroic figure’s life. The presence and recognition of a heroic figure emerges as a result of the social and political changes that occur within or around his/her environment. In Landy’s opinion, the sound films of the 1930s and 1940s such as the biographical film, the costume spectacle and the historical film depict significant individuals and events associated mainly within traditional and watershed moments of a country’s past. The

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[19] Landy, Marcia. Ed. “Introduction.” *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001. 3.

1930s and 1940s were when historical films employed major stars and celebrated significant events in the forging of a national identity. According to Landy, these films frequently served as a form of collective morality as well as a source of morale as they were often produced on a grand scale and were instrumental in establishing conventions about the commercial cinema's uses of spectacle in its treatment of the past. Landy believes that the genre of the historical film reveals the excesses of monumental history and its fascination with both the spectacle and the heroic figure.[20] The limitations of Landy's research are that rather like Neale, her model for the historical film are films made in Hollywood, though in the Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s, and particularly the Hollywood "biopic" of this period.

It is the terms and frameworks provided by the French historian Pierre Sorlin that are most productive for my research on Asian historical films. While most historians believe that the historical film does not reveal history in its true form and is inaccurate in its recollection of the past, Sorlin argues that the historical film provides an opportunity for the audience to engage with parts of history.[21] Not only does the historical film recreate a vision of the past, but it also provides a platform for the audience of the present as well as the future, to 'look back' at how things were. Historical films are fictional because film and the reconstruction of history in film are imaginary. Nevertheless, for Sorlin, himself a historian, the historical film does create an alternative medium, different from the writings of historians, as to how history can be viewed and perceived.

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[20] Landy, *The Historical Film* 7-8.

[21] Sorlin, Pierre. "How to Look at an 'Historical' Film." *The Film in History: Restaging the Past.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980. 20-21.

Sorlin argues that history is really an attempt to clarify as it sorts out what is probable from what is false. It establishes the chronology of events, shows the relationships between them, detects periods of strong social or political tension, and defines their characteristics. These are elements of history that Sorlin refers to as positive history as he describes a society's memory of the past and its function depends on the situation in which the society finds itself:

> Out of the almost infinite mass incidents and encounters which perpetually occur, a certain number are identified and described, and in this way become fixed as events, particular moments, the memory of which will be passed down and adopted by later generations.[22]

According to Sorlin, as most societies create their own history as they evolve, these societies, groups, social classes, political parties and socio-professional communities define their own version of the past. Sorlin provocatively asserts that the particular historical traditions defended by each group and class in a society (and different traditions are defended or attacked by different groups—hence the "history wars" in Australia) function really as an instrument for talking about the present.[23] Conflicts that divide a society and the goals pursued by opposing forces are transposed in the semblance of past events.[24]

The cultural heritage, as Sorlin describes, of every country and every community includes dates, events and characters known to all members of that community and this is the common basis of what Sorlin refers to as 'historical

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[22] Sorlin, *The Film in History* 16.

[23] Macintyre, Stuart and Clark, Anna. *The History Wars*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2004.

[24] Sorlin, *The Film in History* 17.

capital'.[25] Like Bordwell and Thompson, Sorlin believes that it is enough to select a few details from this historical capital for the audience to know that it is watching a historical film and to place it, approximately. When the period is less well known, or does not belong to the common heritage, then the film must clearly stress the historical nature of the events.[26] As such, it is considered that every historical film is an indicator of a country's basic historical culture, its historical capital. And, the historical film is a dissertation about history which (unlike historical writings) does not question its subject nor its depiction of its subject, but which establishes relationships between facts and offers a more or less superficial view of them. In addition, Sorlin believes that historical films are all fictional, in that even if they are based on records, they have to reconstruct in a purely imaginary way the greater part of what they show.[27] In saying that, most historical films combine actual events and completely fictitious individual episodes, suggesting elements of adaptation of history within the historical film, and usually as well invention of numerous details.

In discussing the historical film, Sorlin suggests that the audience in viewing a historical film recognises the existence of a system of knowledge that is already clearly defined. This is because pre-existing historical knowledge is based on tales and books that are already in circulation in the society, though access to that historical knowledge differs for each citizen, depending on the kind of knowledge it is. Nevertheless, like any work of history, a film can only be judged in terms of the knowledge of the past that a society already possesses.

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[25] Sorlin, *The Film in History* 20.

[26] Sorlin, *The Film in History* 20.

[27] Sorlin, *The Film in History* 21.

Sorlin's work is advantaged by the fact that although he discusses examples from American cinema, he also discusses at length major historical films made in France, Italy and the Soviet Union. But he does not discuss films made in Asia at all, and most of his examples are films made about relatively recent periods, his study dealing with films about the formation of the modern nation, and extending back to encompass films dealing with periods no earlier than the French revolution. In dealing with Asian cinema we need to consider other sub-genres of the historical film, particularly those set within history about which there is only limited data, and those that therefore are based on other narrative forms such as chronicles, legends and folktales. These sub-genres of legend and folktale are based on oral traditions, though the chronicle would be based on some form of written documentation. For example, the Thai historical film *The Legend of Suriyothai* is based on the documented *Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*.[28] On the other hand, the Indonesian film *Roro Mendut* is a folktale based on a traditional Indonesian *kethoprak* play, and on a recent novel, developed from knowledge of kethoprak drama. In the course of this thesis, the way in which Southeast Asian cinema uses these forms will be discussed. As Nicholas B. Dirks observes, "The movement from annals to chronicles to historical narratives is the progression from different forms of kingship to the naturalized reality of the nation-state; history has had a subject all along."[29]

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[28] Wyatt, David. K. Ed. *The Royal Cchronicles of Ayutthaya*. With a synoptic translation by Richard D. Cushman. Bangkok, Thailand: Siam Society Under Royal Patronage, 2000.

[29] Dirks, Nicholas B. "History as a Sign of the Modern." *Public Culture.* Spring, 1990. 25-33.

The Post-Colonial Nation

> Our history was not taught... We know the dates, the legends, but we don't clearly see what happened. Our aim is to dramatize history and to teach it so as not to let others teach it to us.[30]

This statement about the importance of history to an emerging nation, and particularly to a previously colonised nation, was made by the great Senegalese filmmaker, Ousmane Sembene (1923–2007). It shows why the representation of history is particularly important in a post-colonial context, because to a large extent history writing, like many other discourses within a colony, is not within the control of the indigenous people. In the past century, as many Asian nations emerge from colonial rule, efforts to understand and define their *own* sense of their nation have become critical. Understanding a nation's history is part of an attempt to know who you are, and for many, this means forming a national identity. This national identity is different from the 'imposed' identity formed while under colonial rule. The new identity unifies the people under one common and shared perspective of the nation. Nevertheless this process is often seen as problematic, for in Western countries at least, the idea of a nation has come under the inspective gaze of critical theory. This section of my introductory chapter surveys theoretical studies of the idea of the nation.

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[30] Quoted in Rosenstone, Robert A. "Re-visioning History." *Visions from the Past: the Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. 178. The Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene wrote and directed numerous films, including some based on his own novels. Among his works are the historical films *Campe de Thiaroye* ('The Camp at Thiaroye', 1987) and *Emitai* ('God of Thunder', 1971).

A major theorist of the emergence of ideas of the nation is the historian of Southeast Asia, Benedict Anderson. Anderson defines the nation as an "imagined community," a community that is both inherently limited and sovereign.[31] Anderson views nationhood as a cultural artefact and nationality as a powerful emotional form of allegiance and legitimacy to the state. Anderson's book provides a history of the emergence of modern ideas of the nation and of nationhood. He argues that the convergence of capitalism and print technology created the possibility for a new form of the imagined community, one that initiated the formation of the modern nation.[32] Anderson believes that nationhood exists as a system of cultural significance, and that national claims are often based on resorts to history, particular histories seen as forming the basis of a national narrative. This is a position that most of the post-colonial nations discussed within this study (India, Indonesia, and Malaysia), but also a non-colonised nation, Thailand, take, as their respective shared communities within their respective national borders refer to a shared history but also to shared cultural similarities. Anderson sees this as a discursive process, one of bringing a nation, or modern ideas of a nation state into existence. He quotes Ernest Gellner, who wrote:

> Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.[33]

The quote to some extent summarises the position of the nations within this research in a number of ways. Firstly, they have consciously sought to recover their traditions,

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[31] Anderson, Benedict. "Introduction."*Imagined Communities*. Revised Ed. London: Verso, 2006. 6.

[32] Anderson, "The Origins of National Consciousness." *Imagined Communities* 46.

[33] Anderson, "Introduction." *Imagined Communities* 6.

and this has undoubtedly led to a certain amount of invention. Secondly, they tend to construct a homogenous and shared imagined community, irrespective of the inequities and social exploitations that exist within them. Moreover, because the nation is identified with the state as the nation-state, and states are invested with power, the construction of the nation may well be attended by the creation of ideologies that support the hegemonic power of the state, as is exemplified in the sort of national histories glorified by the propaganda films made in Indonesia in the 1980s designed to support the Suharto New Order Regime. Anderson makes a further point in his book, a point often reiterated by others, that the modern nation states that emerged from previously colonised societies are built on ideas of the nation, nationhood and nationalism derived from the West.[34]

Post-colonial theorist Partha Chatterjee however, objects to Anderson's view that post-colonial nations are, in effect, clones of the West. Chatterjee argues:

> If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain "modular" forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial

[34] Anderson, "The Origins of National Consciousness." *Imagined Communities* 46.

> resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.[35]

Here, Chatterjee asserts his perception that anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains: the material 'outer' and the spiritual 'inner'. The outer domain, Chatterjee suggests, represents the dominance of the West where their influences are acknowledged and their accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. However, the inner spiritual domain bears the 'essential' marks of cultural identity and presents a greater need to preserve the distinctiveness of one's spiritual culture. As such, Chatterjee emphasises that within this inner domain of national culture, the nation is at its most powerful, creative and historically significant: to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western.[36] To a large extent Chatterjee's remarks about national culture are borne out by the cultural specificity of many of the films discussed in this thesis.

Stuart Hall, in a survey of what is meant by culture and cultural identity in the late twentieth century, lists the various ways in which a national culture enters into discourse.[37] Firstly, there is the *narrative of the nation*, as it is told and retold in national histories, literatures, media and popular culture. Secondly, this narrative often places an emphasis on *origins, continuity, tradition and timelessness*, so that

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[35] Chatterjee, Partha. "Whose Imagined Community?" *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus: The Nation and its Fragments - Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999. 5.

[36] Chatterjee, *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus: The Nation and its Fragments* 6.

[37] Hall, Stuart." The Question of Cultural Identity." *Modernity and its Futures.* Eds. Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992. 293-295.

national identity is represented as primordial. Thirdly, we need to be aware of the tendency of nations to invent traditions. (This point is based on Hobsbawm and Ranger's arguments).[38] A good example, given by Hall, of points two and three is the British Royal family, many of whose ceremonies and traditions have only been invented in the last 150 years, but give the impression of being much older. Fourthly, is the idea that nations are based on foundation myths, stories that locate the origin of the nation, the people and their national character in an earlier time. In Australia one foundation myth is mateship, which is historically connected to the bravery of Australian soldiers and their comradeship at Gallipoli in 1915, only a decade or so after the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia. The Gallipoli legend has been narrated numerous times in documentary films and also in one prominent feature film directed by Peter Weir and released in 1981. Fifthly, some nations at times see themselves as symbolically grounded on the idea of pure, original people or 'folk'—this was a characteristic way of thinking in Nazi Germany.

As Stephen Crofts has remarked in his study of the relation of different cinemas to Hollywood, "some Asian cinemas significantly maintain their own terrain", and these would include films from countries previously colonised that took over as a starting point the Western modular nation-state.[39] According to Crofts, the political, economic and cultural regimes of different nation-states license different kinds of national cinemas. Crofts goes so far as to provide a list of seven varieties of

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[38] Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger, Terence. Eds. *The Invention of Tradition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

[39] Crofts, Stephen. "Reconceptualising National Cinema/s." *Theorizing National Cinema*. Eds. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen. London: BFI Publishing, 2006. 44.

national cinema.[40] In Chapter Two and particularly Chapter Three in this thesis, I will be examining ways in which the nation is narrated (and what kind of nation) in films made in India and Malaysia. In Malaysia in particular we can detect one dominant way of narrating the history of the nation that has been constant over some fifty years, but this is gradually receiving competition from new ways of narrating the nation, particularly in the historical fiction-documentaries of Amir Muhammad, but also in the satiric comedy dramas of Yasmin Ahmad.

One of the most useful points made by Hall, for my purposes, in this article is the following:

> National cultures are a distinctly modern form. The allegiance and identification which, in a pre-modern age or in more traditional societies were given to a tribe, people, religion and region, came gradually in Western societies to be transferred to the *national* culture. Regional and ethnic differences were gradually subsumed beneath what Gellner calls the 'political roof' of the nation-state, which thus became a powerful source of meanings for modern cultural identities.[41]

It will become apparent in the course of reading this thesis that some countries in the Southeast Asian region, and particularly Indonesia and possibly Thailand and

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[40] Crofts, *Theorizing National Cinema* 44-45. Crofts' seven varieties of national cinema is quoted as follows: (1) cinemas which differ from Hollywood, but do not compete directly, by targeting a distinct, specialist market sector; (2) those which differ do not compete directly *but* do directly *critique* Hollywood; (3) European and Third World entertainment cinemas which struggle against Hollywood with limited or no success; (4) cinemas which ignore Hollywood, an accomplishment managed by few; (5) Anglophone cinemas which try to beat Hollywood at its own game; (6) cinemas which work within a wholly state-controlled and often substantially state subsidised industry; and, (7) regional or national cinemas whose culture and/or language take their distance from the nation-states which enclose them.

[41] Hall, *Modernity and its Futures* 292.

Malaysia, still maintain regional and, in places, tribal identities, which have not been fully obliterated by the homogenising modern nation-state and so these societies may be seen as in a gradual state of transition.

Ideology and the Historical Film

Film Studies has now for more than forty years been deeply preoccupied with the issue of ideology. Ideology in the context of the historical film is particularly important. Susan Hayward, for example, affirms categorically that historical films have an ideological function. They "serve up" the country's national history to the indigenous people.[42] Louis Althusser who, in his reworking of Marxist theory, argues that ideology is generated by a dominant class within society who, through economic and political interests, and their control of the state, are able to "interpellate" its citizens, using the ideological state apparatuses. Althusser sees ideology fundamentally as a representation of the imaginary relation of individuals to the real conditions of their existence.[43] For Althusser, ideology is embodied in discourses, representations and images that reflect society's view of 'reality,' and so becomes part of the myths by which a society lives. While these discourses, images and representations are often more imaginary than real, for Althusser the important feature of ideology is that it is perceived as real and natural. Althusser defined ideology most usefully as:

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[42] Hayward, *Cinema Studies* 185.

[43] Stam, *Film Theory* 134.

> 'A system of representation'; in other words as a set of prompts or conventions as to how the world is to be shown and understood. Ideology works through its invisibility; it convinces us that what it shows is 'natural', 'neutral', and 'objectively true', untainted by opinion, perspective or bias.[44]

In addition, Althusser believes that as a photographic medium, film offers an unprecedented context in which ideology can prosper, as it is subject to manipulation by dominant classes.

Althusser's account of ideology was very influential in Film Studies in the 1970s. Others would argue that Gramsci's theory of hegemony, or a modified or updated use of it is a more satisfactory account of the power of dominant groups within the state, and therefore a more useful starting point for discussions of state ideology. Gramsci argues that hegemony exists when a ruling class (or an 'historical bloc') exerts a total, social authority over other classes and the social formation as a whole. Stuart Hall argues that:

> 'Hegemony' cannot be sustained by a single, unified 'ruling class' but only by a particular conjectural alliance of class fractions; thus the content of dominant ideology will reflect this complex interior formation of the dominant classes.[45]

In this thesis, the way in which some Southeast Asian films simply reproduce the ideologies of dominant groups and classes will be illustrated particularly in my study

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[44] Bennett, Peter, Hickman, Andrew and Wall, Peter. Eds. "Theoretical Perspectives." *Film Studies: The Essential Resource*. London: Routledge, 2007. 252.

[45] Hall, Stuart. "Culture, the Media and the Ideological Effect." *Mass Communication and Society*. Eds. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott. London: Edward Arnold, 1977. 333.

of a number of Malaysian films. The issue of ideology will also be explored in relation to the films depicting Indian history, particularly in the way that the dominant political grouping in the lead up to independence in India, the Congress Party, is represented. These films do, to some extent, make an attempt to represent class fractions and ideological differences in the decade or so leading up to independence and partition, but ultimately their view of history is a simplified view of the debates and political manoeuvrings of the period.

Women's Historical Films, Melodrama and the Public Sphere

The following discussion is on the genre of melodrama and its implications within some historical films discussed. The re-examination of melodrama by British based film theorists in the 1970s constituted an important initiative within film studies, with significant contributions made by Claire Johnston, Thomas Elsaesser, Laura Mulvey and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith.[46] For my purposes here, the most useful parts of this initiative are the discussions of melodrama by Mulvey, who, in the mid 1970s, raised issues of the use of melodrama in women's films made by Douglas Sirk in the 1950s. Mulvey explains that, prior to the Hollywood melodrama of the 1950s, the establishment of early British melodrama focused on "transitional, liminal themes that included memories of feudal oppression with reflection on the lot of the

[46] The significant contributions are works by: Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," Thomas Elsaesser's "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minnelli and Melodrama," and the writings of/in Christine Gledhill's edited book, *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, brings together the research into the investigation of women and melodrama.

working man."[47] As Mulvey describes the historical development of the Hollywood melodrama of the 1950s, she illustrates how melodrama became part of twentieth century popular culture.

Based on a resurgence of the family melodrama that was often associated with dramas of domesticity, woman, love and sexuality, the melodrama experienced a transition from its practice as street performances to the interior of the television-dominated home.[48] In her early, pioneering article, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama", Mulvey discusses Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, about a middle aged widow whose children, neighbours and friends abhor her decision to marry a man younger and of lower class. This film engages with issues of class and age-ism. *All that Heaven Allows* is a women's melodrama made for matinee audiences, often described in the trade as a 'weepie'. Mulvey argues the virtue of many of the melodramas made by Sirk is their willingness to reproduce the women's point of view. Others have noted that they deal with situations as well as women's situations. They are characterised by a certain emotional excess – which is sometimes ridiculed, as in the use of the term "weepie". Mulvey argues that this excess is a safety valve (for women) within a society in which male dominance and patriarchal values threaten to govern a woman's life.

In later writings and particularly in her article "Melodrama Inside and Outside the Home," Mulvey surveys and examines the historical origins and development of melodrama, both in its theatrical form, on the nineteenth century

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[47] Mulvey, Laura. "Melodrama Inside and Outside the Home." *Visual and Other Pleasures*. 2nd Ed. London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009. 69.

[48] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 68.

British stage, and its early incorporation into film, particularly in the historical spectaculars of D.W. Griffith.[49] Mulvey notes the way in which melodrama reflects the ways in which nineteenth century society was creating sets of binary oppositions between private and public. For Mulvey, early British melodrama focused on "transitional, liminal themes that included memories of feudal oppression with reflection on the lot of the working man."[50] While musical halls began to develop after the repeal (in 1843) of the restrictive 1737 Theatre Licensing Act, leading to a greater diversity of popular entertainment for the masses within the emerging industrial society of nineteenth century Britain, and to the gradual abeyance of political themes of the early British melodrama, the inherent Manichaeism of nineteenth century culture flourished on oppositions between private and public. For Mulvey, following arguments by Peter Brooks, this in turn led to the separation of the public and private sphere within the bourgeoisie as:

> Problems of class difference and sexual difference are translated into mythology through a series of spatial metaphors: interior/exterior, inside/outside, included/excluded. The oppositions exist on the level of fear and reassurance, and give an order to the contradictions that haunted the cities of industrialised society.[51]

Within these spatial metaphors, the space of the "respectable" nineteenth century woman is the home. In the early twentieth century historical spectaculars of D.W. Griffith, these oppositions become over-determined. Mulvey reminds us that

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[49] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 66-81.

[50] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 69.

[51] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 72-73.

Griffith's historical spectaculars, for example *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), nostalgically hearken back to nineteenth century forms of melodrama, which itself, in the course of that century, in its manifestations in theatre had been "refined into spectacle and sentiment". For Mulvey, Griffiths' melodramatic historical spectacular exemplify "a refusal to acknowledge the modernity of the cinema, the contemporary world and its aesthetics, and particularly a new and changing concept of womanhood."[52] The presence of the spatial metaphors of inside/outside, private and public in a range of films is explored in my discussion of women in historical films, as the historical films within this study demonstrate women's struggle to step out of the private sphere of the home into the public sphere of society.

In the Asian context, Wimal Dissanayake has written on melodrama and its presence in Asian films. Broadly, for Dissanayake, following Mulvey, two of its most important features are its concentration on women as protagonists, and the high degree of emotionality in its style of presentation. Additionally, Dissanayake sees melodrama as a form that arises out of ideological contradictions, sometimes expressing and repeating them, sometimes questioning them, as occurs in Sirk. But this always occurs in a highly emotional form in which emotions are amplified. As Dissanayake points out, the term melodrama is derived originally from the Greek word *melos*, meaning music. As music became less central to melodrama, the term came to signify a form of drama characterised by "sensationalism, emotional intensity, hyperbole, strong action, violence, rhetorical excesses, moral polarities,

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[52] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 71.

brutal villainy and its ultimate elimination, and the triumph of good."[53] If the origins of the term melodrama can be traced back as far as ancient Greece, in more recent times the word melodrama was brought into English from the French term, 'melo-drame'.[54]

As noted, two chapters in the second half of this thesis are devoted to historical films in which women are the major protagonists. The first of these two chapters discusses films dealing with women broadly in what I term the feudal, early modern period. Here, elements of the chronicle, the legend and the folktale are the primary modes of representation of these women. Elements of the chronicle suggest a continuous historical account of events in chronological order, and can be seen in the Thai film *The Legend of Suriyothai* (Chatri Chalerm Yukol, 2001). Elements of the legend and the folktale, based on traditional stories passed through generations, can be seen in the Indonesian film, *Roro Mendut* (Ami Priyono, 1983). A further Thai film, *Muen and Rid* (Cherd Song Sri, 1993) develops, in a more modern, realistic way, a story based on a limited record in the Thai royal archives of the mid nineteenth century. This source outlines the Thai king's beneficence towards a peasant woman who is regarded as having transgressed the law in seeking to escape from grotesque feudal patriarchal customs and behaviour within a Thai rural village. I argue that in the films set within the early modern period discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis, to some extent the women – due to their uncommon characteristics – for a time at least evade or escape the forces of patriarchal oppression, though they

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[53] Dissanayake, Wimal. Ed. "Introduction." *Melodrama and Asian Cinema.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 1.

[54] Gledhill, Christine. Ed. "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation." *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. London: BFI Publishing, 1987. 19.

are able to do this often only with the support also of a male friend, for under law they have few rights within either the public or private spheres of their societies, and there are few public spaces in which they can make an appeal for justice.

The second chapter on women (Chapter Five), on the other hand, discusses films about women in a later period (from about 1880 to 1945) a period which for women is a period of transition to the modern. The films discussed here are firstly, two Japanese studio films made in the 1940s, and secondly, two Indonesian films completed in the early 1980s. Two of the films discussed in this chapter, the two Japanese films, are clearly melodramas, or have very strong melodramatic elements within them: *My Love Has Been Burning* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1949), about the late nineteenth century feminist Hideko Fukuda (also known as Hideko Kageyama) and *No Regrets for Our Youth* (Akira Kurosawa, 1946) about a young woman who attempts to fight against fascism in Japan in the late 1930s and early 1940s. These Japanese films will be contrasted with Indonesian films made about similar protagonists, who are also women involved in a process of transition to the modern world through their attempted engagement with the public sphere: *Raden Ajeng Kartini* (Sjuman Djaya, 1984) about the turn of the century feminist and educator, Kartini, and *Pioneers of Freedom* (Asrul Sani, 1980), about a woman who seeks to clarify her rights within Islam and also joins in the anti-colonial struggle at a time of growing resistance to colonialism in West Sumatra in the 1920s. Whether the Indonesian films I discuss in this chapter can be regarded as melodramas is an issue I address directly in the chapter. But overall I raise here the question of the relationship between historical films and melodramas: whether all women's historical films can be seen as melodramas, or as having melodramatic elements or,

whether the nature of the representation of significant historical protagonists can under some circumstances preclude a melodramatic approach and a melodramatic catharsis?

Most relevant as a point of reference among writing on melodrama, for my purposes here, are Mulvey's writings, for the reason that she has drawn attention to the fact that melodrama as a genre is not simply distinctive in its aesthetic devices, but addresses certain structural features of society, in particular the contradictions faced by women whose lives are confined to the private, domestic sphere. The historical film inevitably presents a certain contrast with this structural aspect of many melodramas. In the films I am examining in Chapter Four, because the films are set within public contexts of the historical past, and not just in the home, women find themselves in a public sphere which is dangerous and they make efforts to control their relation to it. In the films discussed in Chapter Five, all the women make sustained efforts to move from the private sphere of the home, by engaging in some form of social reform, for to varying extents the changes from a feudal society to a modern society are slowly beginning to accord to women the possibility of taking some action and hence to move into public spaces and perhaps even into the space of recorded history, even though they encounter a high degree of opposition from patriarchy in attempting to do so.

The concept of the public sphere deployed in my discussion is based on Jurgen Habermas' notion where, "the sphere of private people come together as a public," and people engage in "a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and

social labor."[55] Gerard Hauser in discussing Habermas elaborates this notion of the public sphere as he explains that for public opinion to form there must be:

> A discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgement. Public spheres are discursive sites where society deliberates about normative standards and even develops new frameworks for expressing and evaluating social reality. It presupposes that active members of society who lack official status may form as publics through their participation in rhetorical encounters that define a public sphere.[56]

The public sphere, nonetheless, within the context of this research differs slightly in its definition as the discussion within this research refers specifically to the position of women attempting to enter the public sphere as a means of discourse. The protagonists within the historical films represent women's move out of the private sphere of the home and outside into a world that allows them to voice their concerns. The women's historical films discussed within this research illustrate the role of the female protagonist as an agent of change in attempts to emancipate from a traditional patriarchal society. The public sphere allows these women who lack 'official' status to present their demands for equality from within their social structures.

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[55] Habermas, Jurgen. "Social Structures of the Public Sphere." *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press, (German (1962)) English Translation, 1989. 27.

[56] Hauser, Gerard. "Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricality of Public Opinion." *Communication Monographs*, June 1998, 65 (2): 83-107. 86.

The Role of Historical Studies in this Research

Because I am investigating the manner in which a number of historical films narrate their histories, at times I use the writings of historians on the people, events and historical periods that are depicted in the films as points of reference in order to clarify what terms, concepts, facts, frameworks, perspectives and debates are usually martialled and deployed by historians in presenting a particular history, of a period, of a set of events, of a movement, or of the role of an historical figure. In this way I aim to sharpen my sense of the way the film relates to that history and itself makes a contribution to the telling of history or to the discourses about that history. Some reference to historical writings is therefore an indispensible part of this thesis. On the other hand, historical writings themselves can be controversial, can conflict with each other in matters of emphasis, or on the way in which they evaluate historical figures and the facts they adduce to do so, and can even, sometimes, disagree on matters of fact.

However the extent to which I deploy historians varies considerably throughout the thesis, depending on how historically specific a particular film aims to be. For instance, in the case of a film such as Attenborough's *Gandhi*, it is clear that the filmmakers have set out to record pertinent events of Gandhi's life broadly in chronological order with as much accuracy as possible, particularly events connected with the evolution of his policy and stratagem of non-violent non-cooperation as a form of political action. Moreover, the time in which Gandhi lived was both a momentous period and one in which a growing world media was increasingly able to

report on and record events, so that access to the details of Gandhi's life was much greater than would have been possible in previous centuries.

Much the same can be said of the film set in the same period and dealing with one of Gandhi's contemporaries and close associates, *Sardar*. Details of 'Sardar' Patel's life are readily available, and the events in which he figures prominently, particularly the negotiations undertaken between the Congress Party and the British regarding the granting of independence to India were extensively recorded by media at the time, by official documents, and subsequently by numerous memoirs of participants. As will be outlined in this section, there are numerous debates within Indian historical writing, and the arguments and positions taken in these writings are important for providing new or alternative perspectives on historical films which deal directly with so much known history, such as *Gandhi* and *Sardar*. Some of these positions on historical writing about India will be discussed below. In the case of the Indonesian film *Raden Ajeng Kartini*, we have numerous letters written by Kartini herself, and a biography based not only on her letters but also on interviews with members of her family still alive.

However, there are many other films dealing with historical situations or periods that are not based as closely in terms of one historical event following another, or may not be concerned with known particular historical figures. One example is the Malaysian film discussed in Chapter Three, *Paloh*, which has fictional characters and a plot that is fictional, but is set in a divisive period of Malaysian history, the Japanese occupation and its aftermath, a period that depicts the key conflicts of which the film sets out to dramatize. There are also films that deal with

historical periods or figures about which only a limited amount is known, such as the Thai film discussed in Chapter Four, *Muen and Rid*, which deals with an actual incident in mid nineteenth century Thailand about which there are only brief and cryptic records and about which much was invented by the filmmaker. There are also films that might be considered as borderline historical texts, such as the Indonesian film, *Roro Mendut*, based on a legendary folktale, but depicting aspects of court life in the Javanese Mataram period at the end of the seventeenth century. Additionally, the issue is not just an issue of the representation of history, for there are prior questions about representation itself, and of the representation of gender, which is why this thesis examines the representation of women within history, and comes to some conclusions about its structural features.

The points about divergent or alternative accounts in historical writing can be illustrated quickly. For example, in my discussion of the films *Gandhi* and *Sardar*, I needed to develop a firm grasp of the major issues connected with the history of the independence movement in India. Here, I initially used writings by the modern Indian historian Sumit Sarkar, who provides normative broad canvases of Indian history. Sumit Sarkar in his book *Modern India: 1885-1947* synthesises a massive amount of information about Indian history (economic as well as social and political) over much the same period in which Gandhi was active. As a member of a group of historians who initiated the Subaltern Studies movement of historical writing about India, regards his approach as writing "history from below".[57] The term "history from below" is used by Sarkar to indicate the identification with approaches to

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[57] Sarkar, Sumit. "Preface." *Modern India: 1885-1947*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983.

historical writing of members of this movement.[58] Yet it seemed to me that there were gaps in Sarkar's account of the history of the independence movement; in particular, I was not satisfied with the detail he provided regarding the increasing divide in the late 1930s between the Congress Party and Muhammad Ali Jinnah's Muslim League, a divide which ultimately led to partition and the creation of Pakistan, with a consequent loss of many lives when Muslim and Hindu people crossed borders in opposite directions at the time when partition was implemented on Independence day and in subsequent months in 1947. I was particularly interested in the period from the early 1930s to the early 1940s, because it was a period which both the films *Gandhi* and *Sardar* largely omit in their narration of events, and so I became intrigued by the question of what the films omitted in their narratives as well as what they included. Eventually I began to realise that Sarkar's broad historical study covering from 1885 to 1947 avoids taking strong positions on the major leaders of independence, because it is mainly concerned with a narrative of events.[59]

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[58] Prakash, Gyan. "AHR Forum: Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism." *American Historical Review*. Vol. 99, 5 (Dec. 1994). 1476–1480. The Subaltern Studies movement is a movement in historical writing about India, developed by Ranajit Guha with five others – Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman and Gyan Pandey. The term subaltern was first coined by Antonio Gramsci and refers to groups in society who were subject to the hegemony of the ruling class. The term "history from below" refers to attempts to tell history from the grassroots of peasants and away from elite projects and positivist historiography. The approach was first developed in Ranajit Guha's research into nineteenth century peasant insurrections in colonial India. Guha provides accounts "from below" of the peasant's insurgent consciousness, rumours, mythic visions, religiosity, and bonds of community. However, while the Subaltern Studies "history from below" resembled approaches developed by social historians in the West, they argued that social conditions of subalternity in colonised India differ from the social conditions addressed by historians writing about Western societies.

[59] There are of course differences even between historians who regard themselves as members of the Subaltern Studies group of scholars. Sarkar has written a critique of the nature of the development of Subaltern Studies writing over its first fifteen or twenty years, and that critique appears aimed at Partha Chatterjee, whose work I use in developing an account of the inner spiritual principle of the nation. See Sarkar, Sumit. "The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies**." *Reading Subaltern*

But another respected historian, R.C. Majumdar, in a study that examines three phases in the movement towards independence, includes in this study as the third phase a succinct account of Gandhi's role, an account, which while highly respectful of Gandhi, does question the dominant myths about Gandhi, and concludes that Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement was effective only until the early 1930s, and played little role after that.[60] Moreover, Majumdar was not afraid of pointing to contradictions within the positions taken by the Congress Party and its leaders, and specifically argues that in the late 1930s the Congress Party took positions that were inflexible in their attitudes to the Muslims, that these positions increased the alienation of the Muslim League hence leading to independence, and that Gandhi overtly supported these positions over a number of years. These historical facts are not provided by Sarkar and they are not presented in either of the films, for the films simply do not deal with this important period of the second half of the 1930s, which had so many historical consequences. Majumdar's perspective on India's independence movement which he describes as a long history of stages and in logical sequence provides an approach that differs from that of both Sarkar and Chatterjee, and allows for a significantly different perspective (and indeed set of judgements) on

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Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia. Ed. David Ludden. London: Anthem, 2002. 418.

[60] Majumdar, R.C. *Three Phases of India's Struggle for Freedom.* Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1961. R.C. Majumdar was the Vice Chancellor of Dacca University from 1935-1942, a period of political change in India. I wish to thank in particular Dr. Rashmi Desai, former Honorary Research Associate in the Department of Anthropology & Sociology, Monash University, Australia, and Professor Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay from the Department of English, Burdwan University, West Bengal, India, for their advice on readings in the area of Indian history.

history. Other historical studies can be found that question the Gandhi myth and base their arguments in historical facts that are not subject to dispute.[61]

With regard to the films from Southeast Asia and from Japan that I explore in this thesis I have made use of a diversity of sources to develop comparative perspectives on them both with regard to their adequacy as history, and with regard to the nature of their representational stratagems. With regard to the Japanese films, there is already a body of pioneering feminist writing (stemming from the 1970s and early 1980s) on the representation of women in some key historical films made in Japan, notably by Joan Mellen and Freda Freiberg.[62] I believe that in my discussions of the Japanese films, based on new or unused historical material, I have augmented their work.[63]

Perhaps most importantly, with regard to the chapters and chapter sections dealing with films about women in the early modern and about women in the period of transition to the modern (a total of seven films made in Southeast Asia are discussed in detail here), there is an increasing body of writing about women in Southeast Asia, and about pre-modern and early Southeast Asian history in general,

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[61] For example in: Mendelsohn, Oliver and Vicziany, Marika. *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1998. 2-5, 77-117.

[62] Mellen, Joan. *The Waves at Genji's Door: Japan through Its Cinema*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976. And , Freiberg, Freda. *Women in Mizoguchi Films*. Melbourne: Japanese Studies Centre, Monash University, 1981.

[63] Other references to my discussion on women in Japanese films also include works by: Mikiso Hane. Ed. Trans. *Reflections on the Way to the Gallows: Rebel Women in Pre-war Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. As well as, material on Hideko Fukuda which includes reference to her autobiography, *Half of My Lifetime*, in Sievers, Sharon. *Flowers in Salt: the Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983.

for many years both of them neglected areas.[64] The earliest of these writings is the discussion of the position of women in early modern Southeast Asia, part of a wider project developed by Anthony Reid. The research first published as an article in 1988 and then as a chapter in a major set of volumes on early Southeast Asia.[65] Reid and his pioneering research have been reviewed thus: "the first pre-colonial historian to escape from the elite-centred paradigm of political narrative to discuss a broad array of economic, cultural, and social transformations affecting the population at large."[66] Reid, following a suggestion from an earlier historian of Southeast Asia, George Coedes, explores ways in which women in Southeast Asia were reported by foreign visitors as influential and respected in ways not found in Europe, the Middle East or South Asia at the time. Subsequent work by feminist historians have to some extent qualified this view, Andaya noting that, even while Reid and Coedes' claims recognise important differences in the status of women in early modern Southeast Asia of the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, in later period with the spread of religion, nationalist movements and the effects of the struggle against colonisation in

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[64] Such as in the works of: Reid, Anthony. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680. Vol. I: The Lands below the Winds*. New Haven: Yale University, 1988. And, Andaya, Barbara W. Ed. *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*. Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Manoa: University of Hawai'i, 2000.

[65] Reid, Anthony. "Female Roles in Pre-colonial Southeast Asia." *Modern Asian Studies*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, Vol. 22, No. 3, (1988). 629-645. And, Reid, Anthony. "Social Organization." *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680. Vol. I: The Lands below the Winds*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. And, Reid, Anthony. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680. Vol. II: Expansion and Crisis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

[66] Lieberman, Victor. "An Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia? Problems of Regional Coherence – A Review Article." *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 54, 3 (August, 1995). 796-807. 796.

the region, women came to be more marginalized within Southeast Asian societies than in earlier times.[67]

There are also stimulating and important works written by authors and scholars in the countries concerned, notably the biography of R. A. Kartini by Sitisoemandari Soeroto, which was a major influence on the film biography of Kartini by Sjuman Djaya, *Raden Ajeng Kartini*, which I discuss in Chapter Five, and which differs in its emphases from much of Dutch and even Australian writings on Kartini, in its careful detailed and exhaustive discussion of the way in which Kartini was manipulated by Dutch colonial authorities and authority figures, especially by those who later promoted her by publishing her works.[68] In my discussion of this film I also draw on a very large body of scholarship on Kartini, the most important work in English being that conducted in Australia by Joost Cote.[69] With regards to my work on the film *Pioneers of Freedom*, I have drawn on historical studies of modernist reform movements in Islam in West Sumatra by the Marxist Anthropologist Joel S. Kahn.[70] Furthermore, the sources for this film in the novelist Hamka's writings have been identified and explored by David Hanan, as have some of the Islamic concepts operating in this film.[71]

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[67] Andaya, *Other Pasts* 1.

[68] Sitisoemandari Soeroto. *Kartini: Sebuah Biografi*. Jakarta: Gunung Agung, 1979.

[69] Reference to works by Joost Cote on Kartini are as follows: *On Feminism and Nationalism: Kartini's Letters to Stella Zeehandelaar 1899 – 1903*. Revised Ed. Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute, 2005. And, *Realizing the Dream of R.A. Kartini: Her Sisters' Letters from Colonial Java*. Leiden: Ohio University Press, 2008.

[70] Kahn, Joel S. *Constituting the Minangkabau: Peasants, Culture, and Modernity in Colonial Indonesia*. Providence: Berg, 1993.

[71] Hanan, David. "Traditions Minangkabau, réforme Islamique et droits de la femme dans deux films de la fin de la période coloniale a Sumatra-Ouest." *Le Banian* 3, (2007): 53–72.

In addition to the writings of historians such as Reid, Kahn, and Andaya, there is a body of work by feminist anthropologists and literary and theatre scholars exploring written, film and theatre and texts of relevance to the history of Southeast Asia.[72] While at points in my arguments I have deployed concepts in feminist film theory, notably concepts deployed by Mulvey and by Barbara Creed, this thesis also engages with a growing body of work by film scholars writing on film (and historical films) made in Southeast Asia, notably writings by Krishna Sen, David Hanan, Anchalee Chaiworaporn and Adam Knee.[73]

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[72] See the essays in: Sears, Laurie J. Ed. *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. See also, Hatley, Barbara. "Texts and Contexts: the Roro Mendut Folk Legend on Stage and Screen." *Histories and Stories: Cinema in New Order Indonesia*. Ed. Krishna Sen. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988. And, Carey, Peter and Houben, Peter. "Spirited Srikandhis and Sly Sumbadras: The Social, Political and Economic Role of Women at the Central Javanese Courts in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries." *Indonesia Women in Focus: Past and Present Notions*. Eds. Locher-Sholten and Anke Niehof. Holland: Foris Publications, 1987. As well as, Rutherford, Danilyn. "Unpacking a National Heroine: Two Kartinis and Their People." *Indonesia*. Vol. 55, The East Indies and the Dutch (Apr., 1993), 23-40.

[73] Krishna Sen. "Filming History in the New Order." Ed. Krishna Sen. *Histories and Stories: Cinema in New Order Indonesia*; Hanan, David. "Film and Cultural Difference: *November 1828*." *Histories and Stories. Cinema in New Order Indonesia*. Ed. Krishna Sen. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988; Anchalee Chaiworaporn and Knee, Adam. "Thailand: Revival in an Age of Globalization." *Contemporary Asian Cinema*. Ed. Anne Tereska Ciecko. New York: Berg Publishers, 2006.

Chapter Two

Differing Perspectives of History in Films about the Indian Struggle for National Independence: *Gandhi* and *Sardar*

Introduction

This chapter explores problems in the representation of history in two historical films about Indian history. Both films are concerned with India's struggle for independence from the British, mainly beginning in the early twentieth century. The films *Gandhi* (Richard Attenborough, 1982) and *Sardar* (Ketan Mehta, 1993) depict the role of two of India's prominent male leaders, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) and Vallabhbhai Patel (1875-1950). While Gandhi is famously known as 'a principal architect of India's independence', he is also recognised as one of the most original and influential thinkers of the twentieth century.[74] It is widely believed that Gandhi's non-violent, non-cooperation movement of *satyagraha* successfully mobilised the Indian people to demand independence from the British in 1947. As I will explain in detail in the rest of this chapter, Gandhi, while primarily remembered as the inventor of satyagraha, or the proposer of the satyagraha stratagem, was equally interested in the organisation and justice at the village level. Gandhi's idea of national development was one that was located at the grassroots as

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[74] Metcalf, Barbara D. and Metcalf, Thomas R. "The Crisis of the Colonial Order." *A Concise History of Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 167.

he was less interested in the idea of the nation and the nation state. For Gandhi, the establishment of an Indian nation state was more of a way of escaping colonialism.

Vallabhbhai Patel on the other hand, was not only a supporter of Gandhi, but was a key strategist within the Congress Party. Patel was also subsequently the Minister of Home Affairs and the 'strong man' of the emerging nation. Despite the fact that Gandhi wanted independence for the nation, he was not a strong statesman, a role which Vallabhbhai Patel successfully filled. Patel was a successful lawyer in Ahmedabad, who had been trained, like Gandhi, in London, but had been able to establish a good law practice in his hometown. Initially, Patel was sceptical of Gandhi and his satyagraha movement after Gandhi's return to India in 1915. But within a few years, Patel had become a devotee and a strong supporter, and, within thirteen years, Patel was regarded as a very effective implementer of satyagraha stratagems, so much so that Patel became known as 'Sardar' meaning, the leader. Most importantly, however, because the film *Sardar* deals with the later period leading up to independence (from 1945-1950), Patel's ability as a strategist, an organiser, a numbers man, and as an administrator meant that he was regarded as the strong man within the Congress Party. Indeed with the incoming Congress Party governing the new nation state, he became seen as its enforcer.

While the film *Gandhi* is well-known, little research has been published on this film as a representation of history. One example of research into the film *Gandhi* is by *The Film Analysis Series*.[75] It provides a scene-by-scene analysis of the film and discusses the film as a narrative, concentrating on the conflict, progression and

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[75] *The Film Analysis Series: Gandhi*. USA: The Film Analysis Series, 1983. This reference was obtained from the Australian Film & Television School (AFTRS) Library, Sydney, Australia.

characterisation within key scenes in the film and the film's development overall. However, the method employed by this unauthored series differs from the discussion within this chapter, which is a study of the relationship between actual history, as it is known, and the depiction of history within the film.

Another example of research into the representation of Gandhi as a historical figure was carried out by Claude Markovits, in his book *The Un-Gandhian Gandhi*, a book devoted to critiquing the 'myth' of Gandhi created in the Western media. [76] Markovits asks why prior to Attenborough's *Gandhi* no significant film on Gandhi was made, in the period before the 1980s. He also asks why the film was made by a Westerner rather than by an Indian filmmaker, and perceives the possibility that any film devoted to showing at length Gandhi's life and career would have been too controversial, especially in India.[77] Markovits considers *Gandhi* to be more a parable, a succinct story that illustrates a lesson, rather than an epic, as the film highlights Gandhi's strengths and accomplishments, while never referring to his childhood or youth. Markovits' main criticism of the film is that, in his opinion, it is hagiographic, idealising Gandhi, and seeing him as a kind of saint. Markovits argues briefly that the film provides too sanitised an account of Gandhi's life and that what it provides is really a Westernised view of Gandhi.

In contrast, my analysis of Gandhi within the film differs, based on the fact that my primary investigation presents a detailed study of the way the film represents the evolution of the concept of satyagraha as a stratagem to unite and mobilise the

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[76] Markovits, Claude. *The Un-Gandhian Gandhi: The Life and Afterlife of the Mahatma*. London: Anthem Press, 2003. Alternate readings on Gandhi can also be found in: Edwardes, Michael. *The Myth of the Mahatma: Gandhi, the British and the Raj*. London: Constable, 1986.

[77] Markovits, *The Un-Gandhian Gandhi* 27.

Indian masses at the grassroots towards independence. This approach also forms the basis for comparison with another monumental historical film about the same period, Ketan Mehta's *Sardar.* As a result, an emerging theme in this chapter is the difference between a Western originating internationally co-produced film, and an Indian produced film on a similar topic, a topic that encompasses both the story of an independence movement, and the formation of a nation state of India. This chapter on the representation of a nation's history discusses problems that arise in depicting history based on the lives of these monumental figures. Noting that these two historical films were directed by significantly different directors (in British film director/producer, Richard Attenborough, and Indian/Gujarati filmmaker, Ketan Mehta) the chapter explores the different historical perspectives that the two films present with regards to India's independence movement. Inevitably, in narrating the stories of their protagonists, the films are selective in the history they represent, and this chapter explores the nature of that selection in the case of each film. So an important question here is, what parts of history are included in each film, and what parts are excluded.

As an international co-production, *Gandhi* received Indian government funding.[78] The film spans a period of fifty-five years of Gandhi's life, beginning in 1893 and continuing until his death, in 1948. The film highlights the evolution of Gandhi's passive, non-violent non-cooperation movement, known as satyagraha, which Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf define as:

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[78] Carnes, Mark C. Ed. "Gandhi." *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies.* New York: H. Holt, 1995. 255. With an estimated budget of $22 million, *Gandhi* was produced by a number of international production companies mainly: Columbia Pictures, Goldcrest Films and International Film Investors, the National Film Development Corporation of India and Indo-British Films.

> 'Truth force', a Gandhian neologism to describe his method of dispute settlement based on a shared pursuit of 'truth' with an opponent, together with mutual respect.[79]

The word satyagraha combines two Sanskrit words, *satya* meaning truth and *agraha* meaning taking, seizing, or holding, the implication being, 'holding to the truth'.[80] The discussion within this chapter, therefore, focuses on the role of Gandhi's satyagraha as a tool to unify and mobilise the Indian masses in opposing British rule.[81] With the partially and intermittently successful implementation of satyagraha as a key stratagem of the Congress Party from 1918 onwards, and its culmination in Gandhi's satyagraha Salt March of 1930, Gandhi became an international figure.

In contrast to *Gandhi*, the film *Sardar* was not an international co-production, but an Indian production directed by Ketan Mehta. Its main emphasis is on the negotiations with the British in the three years leading up to independence, achieved in August 1947. But it also deals with the three remaining years of Patel's life, which saw the unification of India as a nation; and its use of prolonged flashbacks, early in the film, actually results in the film spanning thirty-five years of Patel's political life, from 1915 to 1950.[82] The film was produced, with some government support, by a cooperative operating from Patel's hometown in Gujarati state, with Patel's former private secretary as its producer. Among Indian film theorists it is considered a big budget biographical film that continues the trend "launched by Attenborough's

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[79] Metcalf and Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* xxii.

[80] Hardiman, David. "*Satyagraha*." *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*. India: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2003. 51.

[81] Sarkar, "1917-1927: Mass Nationalism – Emergence and Problems." *Modern India* 180.

[82] *Sardar*. Dir. Ketan Mehta. Perf. Paresh Raval, Annu Kapoor, Tom Alter, Benjamin Gilliani. India: The Foundation for Films on India's War of Independence & the Farmers of Gujarat, 1993.

Gandhi (1982) of government-produced authoritative versions of India's freedom struggle."[83]

As both films are structured around events leading up to India's independence, the climax of the films occurs in the mid to late 1940s when independence is gained from the British on 15 August 1947, while Gandhi is assassinated on 30 January 1948. One consequence of the negotiations for independence was the partition of India. It was a difficult period in the nation's history as partition saw the division of India on sectarian lines and the creation of Pakistan as a separate Muslim nation. It also saw the mass migration of Hindus and Muslims across the Indian border, which resulted in the death and displacement of millions of people.[84] While both films celebrate the achievement of independence, and at the same time, depict and, in effect, mourn the traumatic period of partition, there are questions about the adequacy of the way in which the films depict the process by which partition became inevitable, particularly the increasing estrangement between Congress Party leaders and the leaders of the Muslim League.

With regards to India's independence struggle, I argue that *Gandhi* is primarily concerned with the evolution and deployment of satyagraha as a political stratagem. The deployment of satyagraha was an action that played an important role in the mass mobilisation of Indian people in their demand for independence. *Sardar*, on the other hand, is a film about how the nation was subject to a period of frantic

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[83] Rajadhyaksha, Ashish and Willemen, Paul. Eds. *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, BFI: Oxford University Press, 1999. 515. According to Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, *Sardar* was a "big budget biographical on the last five years of nationalist leader Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (Rawal). The film continues the trend launched by Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982) of government-produced authoritative versions of India's freedom struggle, which have culminated in numerous *Doordarshan* productions in the 50th anniversary of Indian independence."

[84] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 432-437.

political negotiations in the three years or so prior to independence. It was a difficult period for leaders of the Congress Party, as early in the negotiations it became apparent that the aimed-for outcome of a united India was under threat. The following discussion within this chapter focuses on the different historical perspectives that both films develop with regards to the independence movement, the structure of the films in their representation of historical events and the inclusion or exclusion of specific historical events as a means of highlighting the accomplishments (rather than the failures) of the nation's leaders.

Gandhi (1982): Gandhi and the Independence Movement

In the following discussion, I will explain how the films *Gandhi*, and *Sardar* are organised in terms of their selections of time periods.

Gandhi	*Sardar*
1893-1914: Gandhi's life in South Africa and the formulation of 'passive resistance'.	1915-1928: Patel's introduction to Gandhi and his championing of the satyagraha movement.
1915-1944: Gandhi's return to India and his deployment of satyagraha in India.	1945-1947: Patel's is role in negotiating for independence from the British.
1944-1948: In the independence period and its aftermath.	1947-1950: Patel's responsibility as Minister of Home Affairs and his task of unifying the nation.

The three phases in the films might also be considered as 'acts' in each film's narrative, to use the screenwriter's parlance.[85] Using this model it can be argued that each of these films are divided into three acts, or major narrative segments, where each act constitutes a historical phase and each phase ends with a

[85] Aronson, Linda. "Development Strategies for a Traditional Three-Act Film." *Scriptwriting Updated: New and Conventional Ways of Writing for the Screen.* AFTRS, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2000.

turning point that leads into the next act (See Table 2). The three-acts within the films are dominated by historical events, in which each protagonist plays a key role.

But both *Gandhi* and *Sardar* begin with opening prologues that set up and introduce their protagonists. For example, in *Gandhi*, the opening prologue, which dramatizes the moment of Gandhi's assassination, establishes Gandhi as both a hero and a martyr. The film then goes back to the beginning of Gandhi's life, using a flashback to do so. Indeed most of the film is a flashback, which returns towards the end, to the moment of assassination. As for *Sardar* the opening prologue of the film begins in present day India (of 1993), and not with the end of Patel's life. The film begins by commenting on dilemmas of contemporary Indian society, which it presents as selfish and fraught with petty conflicts, before proceeding via a flashback to what it postulates was a more heroic era, the era of Patel, Gandhi and Nehru.

I therefore begin my discussion of Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi.* Inspired by Louis Fischer's written biography, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, the film presents a detailed account of various stages in Gandhi's political career.[86] The film was well regarded as it was considered one of the major British films of 1982, and, according to the critic writing for the *Time Out Film Guide*, any faults within the film "pale beside the epic nature of its theme."[87] It identifies the social and political changes that Gandhi experiences beginning in 1893 with his life in South Africa and his early experimentation with satyagraha. The evolving satyagraha movement once it is adopted and reaches India, forms the central theme of the film. Attenborough

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[86] Fischer, Louis. *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. New York: Harper & Row, 1950. Louis Fischer was a Jewish-American journalist who mostly wrote on anti-communist issues and the political movement of the Soviet Union.

[87] FD. "Gandhi." *Time Out Film Guide*, 1982/1983.

concentrates on the strength of the movement in uniting as well as mobilising the masses as a form of gaining independence from the British. Ben Kingsley who plays the leading character of Gandhi portrays a man of strong principle. It was a role that won Kingsley an Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role, out of eight that the film obtained.[88] In the prefatory titles at the opening of the film, Attenborough declares the scope, focus and limitations of the film:

> No man's life can be encompassed in one telling. There is no way to give each year its allotted weight, to include each event, each person who helped to shape a lifetime. What can be done is to be faithful in spirit to the record and try to find one's way to the heart of the man…
>
> Richard Attenborough,
> in *Gandhi* (1982)[89]

As Attenborough explains, while the film is an attempt to depict Gandhi's life, it is impossible to represent the life of such a monumental figure within a limited time frame.

The first phase of the film is from 1893 to 1915 and portrays Gandhi's life in South Africa. It depicts the early beginnings of Gandhi's formulation and experimentation with the idea of satyagraha, a result of Gandhi's personal experience of being thrown off a train during his early weeks in the country, in 1893. Gandhi's reaction to the experience was to seek an alternative, non-violent form of action

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[88] Other awards that *Gandhi* won at the 55th Academy Awards include: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Film Editing, Best Art Direction, Best Cinematography, and Best Costume Design.

[89] *Gandhi.* Dir. Richard Attenborough. Perf. Ben Kingsley, Candice Bergen, Edward Fox, John Gielgud, Trevor Howard, John Mills, Martin Sheen. USA, Great Britain, India: Columbia Pictures, Goldcrest Films and International Film Investors, the National Film Development Corporation of India and Indo-British Films, 1982. Opening prologue [1:06].

against the oppressive British Raj of South Africa. The evolution of the processes of satyagraha, which involve effectively turning the other cheek under considerable provocation, including physical violence from the authorities, is carefully demonstrated in this section of the film. Gandhi's growing influence in the politics of the Indian community in South Africa, also traced in the film, provides an historically specific context for his actions.

The second phase of the film focuses on the years from 1915 to approximately 22 February 1944. This phase encompasses Gandhi's return to Bombay in 1915, his adoption by the Congress Party, and the deployment of his satyagraha campaigns throughout India. A scene towards the beginning of this section shows an early example of Gandhi's satyagraha campaign, and its influence on the masses. The scene opens with Gandhi's arrival in the district of Champaran, in northwest Bihar, in 1917, as thousands of villagers and farmers gather awaiting his arrival. [90] Gandhi's visit to the Champaran district was in response to complaints by peasants who were forced by the British to cultivate indigo on part of their land, at unremunerative prices.[91] It is here in Champaran that the film shows Gandhi's arrest (for the first time by the British) on grounds of disrupting the peace. However, Gandhi's verbal reasoning and defiance in court results in his release. News of Gandhi's actions in opposing the British begins to spread, thus, setting up the beginnings of the satyagraha movement in India.

As the film shows, the increasing influence of Gandhi's satyagraha became a

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[90] Sarkar, "1905-1917: Political and Social Movements." *Modern India* 155.

[91] Sarkar, "1905-1917: Political and Social Movements." *Modern India* 156. And, Metcalf & Metcalf, "Civil Society, Colonial Constraints, 1885-1919." *A Concise History of India.* 163.

dilemma for the British. The British considered Gandhi's non-violent non-cooperation movement as 'baffling', and they did not know how to respond.[92] As a result, in February 1919 the Rowlatt Act was introduced. The 1919 Rowlatt Act was a law passed by British judge, Sir Sidney Rowlatt, that effectively authorised the government to imprison, without trial, any person suspected of terrorism. It gave the British imperial authorities the power to deal with revolutionary activities.[93] While the passing of the Rowlatt Act is not shown in the film, the Act itself led to the tragic Amritsar massacre of 13 April 1919. The film depicts the massacre. Upon reaching the Jallianwallabagh day market in the northern Indian city of Amritsar, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer took it upon himself to disperse an 'illegal', though peaceful, crowd by opening fire on them. Hundreds were killed and more than a thousand people were wounded. The Amritsar massacre, while an isolated incident, is considered the worst act in the history of the British Raj and became a symbol of colonial injustice.[94] Not all satyagraha campaigns were peaceful. On 5 February 1922, at Chauri Chaura in the Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh, an initially peaceful group of peasants turned violent, upon provocation by police, and set fire to the police station where twenty-two policemen were burned alive. The Chauri Chaura killings marked an unfortunately vicious turn in the implementation of the satyagraha movement, as some participants of the movement were becoming violent, the campaign elicited violent reactions from the British, which was not the aim of its

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[92] Metcalf & Metcalf, "The Crisis of the Colonial Order, 1919-1939." *A Concise History of India.* 179.

[93] Sarkar, "1917-1927: Mass Nationalism – Emergence and Problems." *Modern India* 187. And in, Metcalf & Metcalf, "Civil Society, Colonial Constraints, 1885-1919." *A Concise History of India.* 166.

[94] Metcalf & Metcalf, "The Crisis of the Colonial Order, 1919-1939." *A Concise History of India.* 167.

leaders. As a result, Gandhi halted the satyagraha movement on 11 February 1922.[95]

The film nevertheless, depicts Gandhi's return to the independence campaign in 1930 that culminated with his famous Salt March from Ahmedabad to Dandi, from 12 March – 6 April 1930. The "Salt satyagraha" was an act that signified a protest against British dominance of India's salt economy, and through this march Gandhi encouraged the wholesale, illegal manufacture and auctioning of salt by the Indian people. The Salt satyagraha nevertheless, finally changed the manner in which the British dealt with India, and with Indian matters, as the Salt march attracted the attention not only of Indians, but international press coverage.[96] The events and tragedies that had occurred made the British more cautious in handling their fragile presence in India, and Gandhi and the Congress leaders began to demand *swaraj* or self-rule.

The second phase of the film continues with re-enacted newsreels of Gandhi as he travels to London to attend the Round Table Conference in 1931.[97] Gandhi's London trip however was unsuccessful as no decisions were made regarding India's request for independence. With Gandhi's failed negotiations with the British, Gandhi shifts his attention towards fighting for the better treatment of 'Harijans' or the 'Untouchables', and he also concentrated now on setting up village-based industries such as the making of *khadi* (hand woven cloth) as a way by which villagers could

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[95] Sarkar, "1917-1927: Mass Nationalism – Emergence and Problems." *Modern India* 206.

[96] Sarkar, "1928-1937: Nationalist Advance and Economic Depression." *Modern India* 286.

[97] Stein, Burton. "Gandhi's Triumph." *A History of India.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 326, 328. Stein explains that there were three Round Table Conferences ranging from 1930 to 1932. The first was in 1930, but was boycotted by Congress. The second Round Table Conference was from September to December 1931 that saw Gandhi's presence in London as a Congress representative. However, the conference failed to reach any agreement. The third conference was in 1932 but there was no detailed discussion of the proposed enactment.

avoid having to purchase clothing produced in Britain from fabric originating in India. The film does not emphasise the failure of Gandhi's negotiations with the British, nor does it show Gandhi's involvement with the 'Harijans', but it does portray Gandhi at this point turning to concentrate on his practice of making khadi.

This second phase of the film climaxes with Gandhi's arrest in August 1942 after he declares the Quit India movement, at a time when Britain was involved in World War II, with theatres of war in both Europe and Southeast Asia. The end to the second phase of the film is the crisis produced for the British in India by their involvement in the war. By this time Gandhi had successfully established himself not only as a political leader, but also as an effective leader of the grassroots. The principles of the satyagraha movement had spread throughout the country and had managed to unite and successfully mobilise the people against the British.

The third phase of *Gandhi* continues with the death of Gandhi's wife, Kasturba in February 1944. However, the film cuts to the arrival of Lord Mountbatten as the last viceroy of India on 24 March 1947. From this point on, the film no longer shows the satyagraha movement but events leading up to India's independence. It identifies the complex and deteriorating relationship between leaders of the Congress Party and Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League, but it does not show the 'break-neck' speed at which negotiations and the transfer of power were being carried out in 1947, as hostility and resentment between the Hindus and the Muslims grew.[98] Nor does it show any form of conflict between the Hindus and

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[98] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 448. Sarkar explains, "After a rapid series of 133 interviews with political leaders between 24 March and 6 May," Mountbatten decided on

the Muslims prior to independence and partition, on 15 August 1947, where simultaneously an independent Pakistan was declared.

The film shows the mass migration in opposite directions of millions of Hindus and Muslims across the borders of India and Pakistan at the time of Partition, at which point, violence breaks out. The violence escalates in the city of Calcutta, as Hindus and Muslims kill one another. Gandhi's course of action to stop the violence in Calcutta was to declare a fast-till-death satyagraha campaign. He succeeds in stopping the violence, and a fragile truce settles between the Hindus and the Muslims across the major cities of Calcutta and Bombay. The film subsequently moves to its finale with Gandhi's assassination by Hindu fanatic, Nathuram Godse, on 30 January 1948, while on his way to prayers at Birla House in Delhi.

I would like to draw attention to the fact that the film *Gandhi* does not use many specific dates to mark historical points within the film. Specific dates are only used to mark the following historical events: Gandhi's death (30 January 1948, New Delhi, India), his experience of being thrown off a train in South Africa (1893), and Gandhi's return to Bombay, India (1915). The lack of reference to specific dates and events in Gandhi's life suggests that significant time periods are contextually known to the audience (such as the beginning of World War II). In addition, there is also a possibility that Attenborough did not want the audience to be distracted by the use of dates as the depiction of Gandhi's life and the evolution of the satyagraha movement were considered more important. This, however, can only reduce or confuse an

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a formulated alternative for transfer of power. And, in Moore, R. J. "Plan Partition." *Escape from Empire: the Atlee Government and the Indian Problem*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983. 234.

audience's understanding of the gradual evolution of events and Gandhi's policies within the historical time and context of the twentieth century.

For reference, I provide a summarised list of key historical events in Gandhi's life as identified in the film.

Table 1: Key Historical Events in the Life of Mohandas K. Gandhi as Represented in the film *Gandhi* (1982)

Year	Key Historical Events[99]
South Africa, May-June 1893	Gandhi as a lawyer in South Africa experiences racial discrimination while travelling on board a train, where he is later thrown off.
1896-1907	Gandhi decides to fight for the better treatment of foreign immigrants and executes passive resistance.
January, 1908	Gandhi adopts the word 'satyagraha' in place of 'passive resistance' to describe his non-violent non-cooperation movement.
India, 1915	Gandhi returns to Bombay, India and is welcomed by leaders of the Congress Party and his supporters.
1917	The Champaran campaign sought to assist peasants who were forced to cultivate indigo, on their own land, for British textile merchants.
February, 1919	The Rowlatt Act authorizes the government to imprison, without trial, any person suspected of terrorism. It gave the British imperial authorities the power to deal with revolutionary activities.
April, 1919	Gandhi inaugurates the all-India satyagraha movement.
13 April 1919	The Amritsar massacre saw the killing of hundreds of unarmed men, women and children at the Jallianwallabagh market in Amritsar by British troops.
1920-1922	During this period, Gandhi becomes a strong influence in Congress. He attempts to unite the leaders of the Congress Party and the Muslim League in efforts to demand independence from the British.
1922	The Chauri Chaura killings occurred as a group of peaceful satyagraha supporters are provoked by patrolling policemen. The group retaliates and burns down the Chauri Chaura police station, killing 22 policemen.
12 March – 6 April, 1930	Gandhi launches his first Civil Disobedience movement with the Salt march or Salt satyagraha. The Salt march was in protest against British control over India's salt trade.
1930-1932	The Round Table Conferences were attempts by the British to propose the constitutional formation of an independent India. The first round table conference was in 1930. The second conference was during Gandhi's trip to London, however, that too failed to reach any agreement and the final conference was in 1932, but no details were given of the proposed enactment.
1932-1934	The Second Civil Disobedience movement during this period however was slowly becoming ineffective. It now comprised a wide range of activities that was mostly considered illegal. By the second half of 1932, Gandhi began to move away from politics, and involved himself with issues of the 'Harijans' and concentrated on agricultural based industries such as the spinning of *khadi*.
1939 (-1945)	With Britain preparing for war, Gandhi and most of the Congress leaders were imprisoned.
8 August 1942	The Quite India movement is launched as Gandhi calls for "mass struggle on non-violent lines on the widest possible scale." The next day, Gandhi and Congress leaders are arrested.
22 February 1944	The death of Gandhi's wife, Kasturba.
16 August 1946	Jinnah declares Direct Action Day and communal riots break out at a rapid speed: 16-19 August in Calcutta, from 1 September touching Bombay, 10 October spreading to Noakhali in east Bengal, 25 October in Bihar, by November in Garmukteswar, Uttar Pradesh, and from March 1947 onwards engulfing Punjab.
early 1947	Communal riots, combined with the evident unworkability of the Congress-League coalition, compelled many to think in terms of accepting the option of partition.
24 March 1947	Lord Mountbatten arrives as the last Viceroy of India. **Note**: Wavell in the final draft of his 'break down plan' in September 1946 had already suggested total British withdrawal from India by 31 March 1948. The formula of freedom-with-partition was becoming widely accepted well before Mountbatten's arrival.
24 March – 6 May 1947	Mountbatten chairs a number of negotiations as Congress leaders and the Muslim League debate the idea of independence, with the option of partition.
15 August 1947	India celebrates its independence as Pakistan becomes an independent Muslim state.
post 15 August 1947	As mass migration occurs across India, sectarian riots break out in cities such as Calcutta and Bombay. Gandhi decides to fast-till-death as a means of stopping the violence. His actions are successful.
30 January 1948	Gandhi is assassinated on his way to prayers at Birla House.

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[99] Sarkar, *Modern India.*

In the film's shift forward from 1932 to 1944, *Gandhi* omits a number of significant historical events. For example, the film does not address the deteriorating relationship between the Congress Party and the Muslim League that began towards the end of the 1920s, and worsened in 1937 with Congress decisions taken in that year that made it impossible for members of the Muslim League to join the Congress Party without withdrawing from the League. Nor does it explore debates that led to the Muslim League's eventual decision to demand a separate Muslim state, one that results in India's later partition. Had the film included relevant scenes explaining the position of the Muslim League, it would have clarified reasons behind the ultimate decision for independence with partition. However, the reasons for excluding certain events from history will be explored a little later in this chapter.

Nevertheless, one development that the film does explore is that after Gandhi's return from the Round Table Conference in London, he decided to turn to do 'constructive village work' and focus on 'Harijan' welfare.[100] Constructive village work within the film demonstrates Gandhi's setting up of *ashrams* (traditional spiritual villages) as well as village based industries, such as the self-making of khadi, for individual sustainability. However, the film does not explore Gandhi's policies regarding the 'Harijans', whom he opted to champion. The term 'Harijan' is the literal term coined by Gandhi in 1933 to identify the Untouchables who were considered the lowest level of the Hindu caste system in both status and economic terms.[101] However, there have been numerous debates about what Gandhi's policies

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[100] Sarkar, "1928-1937: Nationalist Advance and Economic Depression." *Modern India* 328.

[101] Mendelsohn and Vicziany, "Glossary." *The 'Untouchables'* xiii, 1, 3. The term 'Dalit' is considered a more formal term to refer to the Untouchables.

were, as while he may have championed the Harijan cause, there were also many Harijans who did not agree with his ideals as they were considered "ambiguous in motives and significance."[102]

Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany clarify this ambiguity, seeing Gandhi's Harijan campaign as manifesting an unresolved tension between Gandhi's religious and political aims. On the one hand Gandhi championed the right of the Untouchables to worship in Hindu temples, passionately believing in this reform, although by and large he was a defender of caste. Gandhi's campaign on their behalf made him popular with the Untouchables but at the same time, the Untouchables constituted an important electoral grouping to be won over by the Congress Party.[103] Gandhi's popularity with the Untouchables was put to the test in the 1937 election, in which Gandhi and Congress only won half the seats reserved for Scheduled Caste candidates, and the strength of Gandhi's closest rival B.R. Ambedkar (and his Independent Labour Party (ILP) was revealed when the ILP won twelve of fifteen seats.[104] Mendelsohn and Vicziany believe that this was because Gandhi's 'Harijan' strategy was considered 'simple', as Gandhi had tried to convince the Untouchables that they could take their place as equal citizens of an independent India, something that Ambedkar, himself an Untouchable, could see could not be easily achieved, at least in the short term.[105]

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[102] Sarkar, "1928-1937: Nationalist Advance and Economic Depression." *Modern India* 328.

[103] Mendelsohn and Vicziany, "Religion, Politics and the 'Untouchables'." *The 'Untouchables'* 107.

[104] Mendelsohn and Vicziany, "Religion, Politics and the 'Untouchables'." *The 'Untouchables'* 108.

[105] Mendelsohn and Vicziany, "Religion, Politics and the 'Untouchables'." *The 'Untouchables'* 112.

This complex and ambiguous political relation that Gandhi had to the Untouchables is not remotely addressed by the film. While the film is keen on showing Gandhi's strengths and successes, the film avoids representation of Gandhi's personal or political shortcomings, or failures of stratagem, except for scenes early in the film which show the difficulties such a unique personality could make for the lives of close members of his own family. Indeed Marika Vicziany, co-author of a major study of the Untouchables, has commented, sardonically, that in her view Attenborough's film *Gandhi* is such an idealised portrait, that one can only explain this fact by viewing the film as a reaction formation, on the part of Attenborough and others involved, to a deep sense of guilt at the shame of Britain's colonising of the Indian sub-continent for nearly two hundred years.[106] The selection of events and periods of Gandhi's life for the film were made by Attenborough, together with the film's screenwriter, Englishman John Briley.[107]

For reference purposes, the following table summarises the three phases and turning points as represented in the film *Gandhi*.

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[106] Vicziany, Marika. 5 November 2007, Personal communication.

[107] Attenborough was keen to appoint Briley to work on the script for *Gandhi*, having admired Briley's earlier work on *Pope Joan* (1972). Upon receiving an earlier version of the script, written by Robert Bolt, Briley believed that he needed to write his own original screenplay, which eventually led to the final version of the screenplay, attributed to Briley alone. See Attenborough, Richard. *In Search of Gandhi.* London: The Bodley Head, 1982. 163-164.

Table 2: The Three Phases and Turning Points in the film *Gandhi* (1982)

Phase / Running Time	**Year**	***Gandhi* (1982)**
Opening prologue of the film	30 January 1948	The film begins with Gandhi's assassination at Birla House.
		Kingsway, New Delhi - Gandhi's funeral procession which as attended by both national and international delegates. **Note**: The film shifts to flashback
Act I / Phase I 1893-1915 [40 minutes]	1893	The film shows Gandhi's experiences in South Africa as it starts with his experience of being thrown off a train.
		Gandhi carries out demonstrations of passive resistance in his fight for the better treatment of foreign immigrants. During a protest regarding new travel laws proposed by the South African government, Gandhi is beaten by the police. Gandhi however, remains passive and does not retaliate.
		Gandhi's action of non-violent non-cooperation leads to numerous satyagraha movements in Johannesburg. **Note**: The turning point of this phase is with Gandhi's meeting General Jan Smuts, Colonial Secretary of the time. In reaction to Gandhi's influence on the migrant community, Smuts releases Gandhi from jail but asks him to return to India.
Phase II 1915-1944 [100 minutes]	1915	Gandhi arrives in Bombay, India and is welcomed by members of the Congress Party and crowds of supporters.
	1917*	The film shows the deployment of Gandhi's satyagraha movement and its evolution: The Champaran campaign shows Gandhi travelling to Champaran to listen to the complaints of poor textile farmers. As Gandhi travels through Champaran, he is arrested for disrupting the peace and faces the magistrate. Gandhi justifies that there is no basis for his arrest and is finally released.
	February 1919*	The film shows the growing influence of the satyagraha movement as peaceful demonstrations take place across India. **Note**: Because the British did not know how to 'handle' Gandhi or the satyagraha movement, the Rowlatt Act was introduced.
	13 April 1919*	The Amritsar massacre. The film shows the tragedy as General Dyer opens fire on unarmed men, women and children in a public market. The inquest into his actions shows his unremorseful attitude of the incident.
		The film shows Gandhi addressing mass crowds of the Indian people, mostly those from the grassroots. He preaches the message of unity for an independent India.
	5 February 1922*	The film shows that the satyagraha movement has taken a violent turn with the death of the 22 policemen. As a result, Gandhi calls a halt to the satyagraha movement.
		The film highlights 'insignificant' yet personal events in Gandhi's life such as his renewal of vows with his wife.
	12 March 1930*	The film shows Gandhi's execution of the Salt march that is covered and documented by a number of local and international journalists.
	1931*	The film shows Gandhi's journey to London to attend the Second Round Table Conference through a number of re-enacted newsreel clippings. However, the Round Table conference fails as no decisions are made regarding India's independence.
	1932*	The film shows that Gandhi is placed under house arrest for a lengthy period of time. He is constantly seen spinning the khadi to make cloth.
	8 August 1942*	Gandhi is placed under house arrest after he launches the Quit India movement.
	22 February 1944*	While under house arrest, the film reveals the tragic death of Gandhi's wife. **Note**: The turning point of this phase of the film is with the death of Gandhi's wife Kasturba, after which Gandhi turns to focus on reassert his demand for swaraj.
Phase III 1944-1948 [40 minutes]	23 March 1947*	The film shows the arrival of Lord Mountbatten as the last viceroy of India
		The film quite abruptly shows the independence of India, and an independent Pakistan on 15 August 1947. **Note**: The film does not show Mountbatten's efforts leading up to independence. The film does not show the 'break-neck' speed in which negotiations for an independent India takes place. Nor does the film show how Pakistan becomes a separate nation.
	Note: After this point, the third phase of the film does not chronologically conform to historical events and there is a discrepancy between historical events and events represented in the film.	
		(1947) The film shows mass migration taking place along the borders of India and Pakistan. However, soon violence breaks out between the Hindus and Muslims.
		(1946) Violence in Calcutta escalates as killings between the Hindus and Muslims continue. Gandhi announces a 'fast-till-death' as a method of stopping the violence. It is successful and the violence stops.
	15 August 1947*	The closing scene of phase three returns to the first scene of the film as it shows Gandhi on his way to prayers. As he steps out into the small crowd gathered at Birla House, three shots ring out.
	30 January 1948*	The closing scene of the film ends with Gandhi's ashes being scattered on the Ganges River.

* Date not indicated in the film.

Sardar (1993): the Making of the Iron Man

The following discussion focuses on the representation of another prominent Indian leader, Vallabhbhai Patel, in the film *Sardar*. As earlier mentioned, Patel was a successful lawyer, who after listening to Gandhi speak in June 1916 became a strong devotee of Gandhi and the satyagraha movement. Patel's strength came from his extraordinary powers of organisation and his unreserved and unquestioned sense of loyalty, as he became the "political evangelist of Gandhi's ideas and ideals."[108] The film *Sardar* depicts Vallabhbhai Patel's life as a politician and a statesman in India's struggle for independence. However, Patel's greatest contribution in the making of modern India was the unification of India's more than 550 provinces and princely states.[109] Patel earned the prefix Sardar to his name after he led the 1928 Bardoli campaign that was considered the first successful peasant-based civil disobedience campaign.[110]

The film *Sardar* was produced by an organisation known as the Foundation for Films on India's War of Independence and the Farmers of Gujarat. Notably, Gujarat was Vallabhbhai Patel's home state. The producer of the film, H.M. Patel (not a relative) was Vallabhbhai Patel's personal assistant and close confidante during Patel's term as the Deputy Prime Minister of India. H.M. Patel, who was also a fellow Gujarati, founded the trust for the Foundation as an initiative to honour the memory and contribution of Sardar Patel to the nation. While the film was directed

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[108] Tahmankar, D.V. "Prelude: Reluctant Recruit." *Sardar Patel*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970, 18.

[109] Tahmankar, "Sardar's Finest Hour." *Sardar Patel* 19, 216-237.

[110] Sarkar, "1917-1927: Mass Nationalism – Emergence and Problems." *Modern India* 211-212.

by Gujarati director Ketan Mehta, the script was written by post-colonial theatre activist and screenwriter, Vijay Tendulkar (b. 1925). Tendulkar was known for his screenplays that featured themes such as "political vendettas, and fights between feudal rulers and oppressed castes."[111]

The following table summarises key historical events in the life of Vallabhbhai Patel as represented in the film:

Table 3: Key Historical Events in the Life of Vallabhbhai Patel as Represented in the film *Sardar* (1993)

Year	Key Historical Events[112]
Ahmedabad, India, 1915	As a barrister in Ahmedabad, Patel is sceptical upon hearing about Gandhi and his satyagraha movement.
1917 (-1924)	The years between 1917 and 1928 are considered formative years of Patel's political career. It covers his municipal career, participation in satyagraha, flood relief work, peasants' no-rent campaigns, and many other social and political activities.
Godhra, 1917	Patel is introduced to Gandhi for the first time and is inspired by Gandhi's speech on freedom from the British.
1917*	The Champaran campaign, led by Gandhi, sought to assist peasants who were forced to cultivate indigo, on their own land, for British textile merchants.
April, 1919*	Gandhi inaugurates an all-India satyagraha movement.
1928	The Bardoli campaign. When the government announces a revenue-hike, Patel leads and organises a successful and peaceful no-revenue campaign.
3 February 1928**	The task of the Simon Commission was to gather Indian public opinion on the next stage of political advancement in India and report back to the British Parliament. The Commission, under Nehru where a committee was formed in which Congress, the Liberals and the Muslims all worked together formulated the *Nehru Report* which suggests the acceptance of Dominion status as India's political objective. There was a considerable debate between accepting dominion status as opposed to independence.
7 March 1930	Patel is arrested and jailed for the first time, prior to Gandhi's Salt satyagraha.
1932-1933*	Gandhi and Patel are imprisoned together for 16 months.
8 August 1942	Gandhi launches the Quite India Movement. The next day however, Gandhi and all Congress leaders, including Patel are arrested. Note: The film begins with the Quit India movement.
1945	Patel is released from Yerawada Jail, Poona.
25 June – 14 July 1945	The Simla Conference was arranged by Wavell to start negotiations to discuss a new Constitution for a future independent India. However, the Conference broke down due to Jinnah's intransigent demands.
24 March – June 1946	Negotiations take place with Indian leaders on issues of forming an interim government, and the principles of framing a new constitution for an independent India. However, the Cabinet Mission Plan and Interim Government manoeuvres were merely 'stepping stones' on the road to a communal holocaust and partition.
16 August 1946	Jinnah declares Direct Action Day and the nation is transformed by sectarian riots and peasant rebellion at an unprecedented scale: 16-19 August in Calcutta, from 1 September touching Bombay, 10 October spreading to Noakhali in east Bengal, 25 October in Bihar, by November in Garmukteswar, Uttar Pradesh, and from March 1947 onwards, engulfing Punjab.
early 1947	The sectarian riots, combined with the evident unworkability of the Congress-League coalition, compelled many to think in terms of accepting the option of partition.
24 March 1947	The arrival of Lord Mountbatten.
24 March – 6 May 1947	Mountbatten carries out a series of interviews with 133 political leaders. Mountbatten decides that the Cabinet Mission framework was untenable, and formulates an alternative plan, code named 'Plan

[111] Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* 226. Vijay Tendulkar (b. 1925) was a leading Indian playwright as well as a television and film writer. Among his other works was the screenplay for Shyam Benegal's, *Nishant* (1975), a film that was well received internationally.

[112] Sarkar, *Modern India*. And, Tahmankar, D.V. *Sardar Patel*.

	Balkan'. Plan Balkan was abandoned, and V.P. Menon and Patel's suggestion of Plan Partition, where transfer of power to two central governments, India and Pakistan, are accepted.
July 1947	Patel takes over the new States Department, together with V.P. Menon tackle the task of uniting the more than 550 provinces and princely states.
by 15 August 1947	By independence, all states except Kashmir, Junagadh and Hyderabad had agreed to sign an Instrument of Accession with India, acknowledging central authority over defence, external affairs and communications.
by November 1948	The accession of the last of the princely states to form a united India.
15 December 1950	Patel dies of a heart attack.

* Historical events/issues shown in the film.
**Historical events/issues summarised by scenes within the film.

Like *Gandhi*, *Sardar* is also divided into three major phases of its protagonist's life. The film begins with an opening prologue set in India at the time the film was made. Scenes of social disorder, chaos and fighting on the streets are experienced and witnessed by an elderly man (shortly to be introduced in the film as the film's future scriptwriter). The scene suggests contemporary India still has many problems stemming from the past. The opening prologue can be seen as a form of Brechtian stratagem, deployed to give the film's story pertinence to the present.

The first phase of the film, which covers the period 1915 to 1928, begins with a flashback to Patel's early association with Gandhi and the satyagraha movement. The film shows Patel to be sceptical of Gandhi and his ideals on Gandhi's arrival from South Africa. Nevertheless, by 1917 Patel becomes a supporter of Gandhi inspired by familiarity with Gandhi's ideals of satyagraha and swaraj. The film shows Patel's devotion to the cause, as he burns his Western clothes and exchanges them for traditional Indian dress, signifying his devotion to Gandhi and the satyagraha movement. The next fifteen minutes of the film shows how Patel becomes the "Iron man of India".

Patel leads and organises the Bardoli satyagraha, a campaign advocating "no-revenue" for the British. The film shows Patel in 1928 addressing a gathering in Bardoli to propagate the ideals of the non-violent non-cooperation satyagraha

movement. At this point in the film, a traditional singer, a satyagraha supporter, is shown lending his support to the campaign. Traditionally songs appear in most Indian films as a form of entertainment, a means of breaking the film's rhythm. However, in *Sardar* the song functions as a key element of uniting the people of Bardoli. The song calls for an awakening, and is meant to inspire and raise the morale of the people to unite against oppressors. Through a set of montages, and accompanied by music composed by Vanraj Bhatia, the film shows Patel travelling from village to village to spread the word of satyagraha. As Patel gains the attention of the masses, he also manages to gain the support of the women. Not only do the women become strong advocates of satyagraha, but they also provide financial support to the movement. Although the British sent forces to Bardoli, and there are powerful scenes of the burning of towns, the Bardoli campaign ends peacefully with Patel and the British reaching an acceptable agreement.

The first phase of the film climaxes with Patel's *rite de passage* through fires at Bardoli. It is a symbolic personification of the conflicts and hardships that had arisen in the area as "the peasants of Bardoli underwent a baptism of fire."[113] Bardoli would be one of Patel's early major accomplishments, with his success here becoming a signifier of Patel's strong and assertive iron will.[114] As the turning point of this phase of the film, Patel addresses a gathering of the grassroots at the end of the campaign and expresses his gratitude for their support. The scene reveals the impact of the Bardoli satyagraha as peasants and villagers of the grassroots unite in

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[113] Khan, A. M. "The Mighty Ploughman." *Leader by Merit: A Study of the Career and Character of Sardar Patel, as well as his ideas and ideals, including all his important speeches from 1921 to 1946*. Lahore: Indian Print Works, 1946. 55.

[114] Sumit Sarkar, "1928-1937: Nationalist Advance and Economic Depression." *Modern India* 277. And in, Tahmankar, D.V. "Two Peasant Struggles." *Sardar Patel* 97-106.

support of Patel, Gandhi and the satyagraha movement. It is only at this point in the film, after approximately twenty minutes of the prologue that the opening credits begin to roll.

The second phase of *Sardar* runs for approximately 135 minutes. It focuses on the years between 1945 and 1947, and dynamically presents a remarkable amount of detail regarding the negotiations underway at meetings leading up to India's independence. This phase opens with the arrival of nationalist leaders at the 1945 Simla Conference (25 June-14 July 1945). Chaired by Viceroy Wavell, who proposes a united and independent India, the meeting reaches a stalemate, as Jinnah demands a separate Muslim state. The Conference fails, as no agreement can be reached between the leaders of the various parties. Subsequent scenes show various forms of negotiations taking place between the British, the Congress leaders and the Muslim League.[115] One example of this is a scene where Wavell presents a new set of plans to Nehru, Maulana Azad and Patel (excluding Jinnah, at this point), and the idea for an independent Hindu and Muslim state is proposed. Plan A was for a Union, where the country was divided according to Hindu and Muslim populations. The Union would be in-charge of defence, foreign affairs and communication, while the rest of the power would remain with the provinces. Plan B on the other hand, would see the partition of India, in which two nations are formed, Hindustan and Pakistan, in which case the Punjab and Bengal regions would also be divided. However, while both plans were rejected, Plan A is given the more sympathetic.[116]

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[115] Moore, R.J. "The Burden of Disengagement." *Escape from Empire* 16-17, 57.

[116] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 429.

From this point on, in 1946, reports of negotiations are presented via the use of newspaper clippings and archival footage. Newspaper clippings and archival footage are inserted to show this period of negotiation as an indicator of the successes or failures, of negotiations taking place. Throughout this period of negotiation, the film shows how Jinnah and the Muslim League are slowly excluded by Congress from making any decisions, largely due to Jinnah's intractability. The exclusion of the Muslim League finally leads Jinnah to declare Direct Action Day for 16 August 1946, which results in the break out of communal riots and violence throughout the country. As the film shows, Patel's role during this second phase of the film has changed, as he now becomes more of an administrator and a strategist, attempting to steer negotiations to the advantage of Congress, as well as contain the violence sweeping the nation. Patel's principles of satyagraha are also tested, as he struggles to put an end to the overwhelming violence.

The speed of the second phase of the film begins to grow intense with the arrival of Lord Mountbatten on 24 March 1947. While the British goes so far as to propose a plan for independence by 31 March 1948 (which was initially a proposal made by Wavell in the final draft of his 'break down plan' in September 1946),[117] on 3 June 1947 Mountbatten announces independence with partition for 15 August 1947, a mere 73 days away. From this moment on, events within the film, as within history, begin to escalate to a break-neck speed. A countdown begins as the film shows dates on a calendar that are torn to mark the passing of days. The countdown towards independence and the transfer of power is also inter-cut with newspaper clippings and archival footage reporting events as they occur. The climax of this second phase

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[117] Sumit, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 447.

of the film is the actual declaration on 15 August 1947, of India's independence, which is of course accompanied by partition, so the celebration is rapidly followed by dismay at the horrific degree of violence that begins to occur. The intensity of unfolding events following independence continues into the third phase of the film.

To a certain extent, the third phase of the film overlaps and continues from independence on 15 August 1947 with the final unification of the princely states that occurs by November 1948. In this final section the film concentrates on Patel's position as the Minister of Home Affairs as he takes charge of the new States Department and is requested by Nehru to tackle the issue of uniting the more than 550 provinces and the princely states. By 15 August 1947, all states except Kashmir, Junagadh and Hyderabad had agreed to sign an Instrument of Accession with India, acknowledging India's central authority over the three areas of defence, external/foreign affairs and communications.[118] At this point, Patel has indeed 'moved away' from the principles of satyagraha, as he struggles to unite and form a united India through a subtle mixture of coercion and extortion:

> Sardar Patel, who took charge of the new States Department in July 1947, together with V.P. Menon who became secretary – tackled the situation in what had become the standard practice of the party: using popular movements as a lever to extort concessions from princes while simultaneously restraining them (or even using force to suppress them once the prince had been brought to heel, as in Hyderabad).[119]

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[118] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 451.

[119] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 450.

As a result, Sardar Patel finally achieved this goal of unifying India, prior to his death on 15 December 1950.

The following table sums up the three phases and turning points in the film *Sardar:*

Table 4: The Three Phases and Turning Points in *Sardar* (1993)

Phase / Running Time	Year (as in the film)	*Sardar* (1993)
Opening prologue within the film	1993 present day India	The film begins in 1993 India and shows the modern, yet chaotic life of society that is still filled with daily violence. The characters question the 'freedom' that they now have. **Note**: The film cuts to flashback, and Phase I of the film.
Phase I: 1915-1945 [the first 20 minutes of the film]	1942	Narration: The Quit India movement is declared as Congress leaders, such as Gandhi, Patel and Nehru give speeches calling for the British to quit India. However, the next day all Congress leaders are arrested. **Note**: The film cuts to another flashback.
	1945, Yeravda Jail, Poona	The film shows Patel being released from jail and welcomed by Congress supporters. **Note**: The film cuts to another flashback.
	1915, Ahmedabad	Patel is playing bridge with a group of lawyers. The film shows his sceptical attitude towards Gandhi as he ignores Gandhi's arrival at the club.
	1917, Godhra	The film shows Patel's first formal introduction with Gandhi and how he is inspired by Gandhi's ideals.
	1928, Bardoli	By 1928, Patel himself gives a speech on the non-violent non-cooperation movement. He campaigns to unite the people of Bardoli and persuades them to not pay revenue to landowners. Patel travels from village to village to promote satyagraha and gain support from the grassroots.
		Newspaper clips highlight Patel's accomplishments
		Patel rides through a burning field. This scene is symbolic as Patel gains *rite de passage* as 'Sardar'.
		Patel successfully reaches a peaceful agreement with British officials and landowners.
		Note: The turning point at this stage of the film ends with the show of support that Gandhi and Patel receive as they arrive at a mass gathering of Bardoli peasants and villagers. Opening credits roll.
Phase II 1945-1947 [runs for approximately 135 minutes of the film]	25 June – 14 July 1945, Simla	The film shows the arrival of nationalist leaders at the Simla Conference. Viceroy Wavell presents his proposal for a united and independent India. The Congress leaders agree, but Jinnah opposes citing the desire for a separate Muslim state. In the end, no agreement is reached between Congress and the Muslim League.
	between 24 March – June 1946*	Nehru, Maulana Azad and Patel meet Wavell. Wavell proposes two plans of action: Plan A – one Union, divided according to Hindu and Muslim population. The Union will be in-charge of defence, foreign affairs and communication. The rest of the power will remain with the provinces. Plan B – the partition of India in which two nations are formed, Hindustan and Pakistan, but the Punjab and Bengal regions will also be divided. B is rejected, but Plan A is taken under consideration.
		Note: From 1946 onwards with the Cabinet Mission's May 16th proposal, various negotiations take place to form an independent (and at this point) united India.
		Congress and the Muslim League struggle to reach a compromise. Nehru opposes the idea of a divided India but Patel asserts that Congress needs to be brought into power. Jinnah on the other hand feels betrayed by both the British and Congress.
	16 August 1946*	Jinnah declares Direct Action Day when no decision with regards to the position of Muslims and the Muslim League is reached.
		Communal riots break out around the city. Patel drives through the streets filled with destruction and carnage.
	24 March 1947	Mountbatten arrives in India and meets with the Indian leaders: Nehru, Patel, Gandhi and Jinnah.
		Nehru meets Mountbatten at Simla hill station. Mountbatten proposes Plan Balkan which Nehru rejects, V.P.Menon presents a new proposal, Plan Partition.
	3 June 1947	Mountbatten announces the date for independence with partition as 15 August 1947, leaving 73 days before the transfer of power. The following unfolding scenes are intense in their speed and in the unfolding of events as India heads towards independence with partition.
	15 August 1947	India becomes an independent nation with partition as Pakistan becomes a separate state. **Note**: The turning point of this second phase of the film is with the change in Patel's role, from negotiator of independence to the person in charge of uniting India.
Phase III 1948-1950	1947*	Mass migration of Hindus and Muslims take place along the India-Pakistan border. Chaos and communal violence breaks out between the Hindus and Muslims. Patel

[the final 10 minutes of the film]	1947*	struggles to control the situation and tries to reach a compromise between the groups.
	1948*	Patel meets with leaders and princes of the provinces and princely states in attempts to persuade them to unite and form a united India.
	1950*	Patel is at peace with the unification of all provinces and princely states prior to his death on 15 December 1950

*Specific dates not identified in the film.

Film Stylistics and Cultural Specificity in *Sardar*

As a film narrative, *Gandhi* is organised around three major historical phases of the history of the struggle it depicts, large sections of the film being devoted to each of these phases or period. So too is *Sardar*. However, in *Sardar* Mehta also initially employs, in a rather loose and unsatisfactory way, the intervention of Brechtian aesthetics. This is done as a means of presenting the relevance of the film to contemporary Indian society, and to encourage audiences to think about what they see on the screen.

Ketan Mehta is known for his use of Brechtian dramaturgy. Many of Mehta's early works were relatively experimental and deployed Brechtian dramaturgy, examples being his works dealing with contemporary India, such as *Holi* (1984) and *Maya Memsaab* (1992). The opening scenes of these films show contemporary India and its social dilemmas, as well as the conflicts created by political instability within the nation. The opening prologue of *Sardar* portrays contemporary conflicts within India, showing domestic violence and subsequent violence in the street, both stemming from the frustration and dissatisfaction of Bombay residents with the poverty and violence surrounding them. This prologue develops in such a way that one of the witnesses of the violence is a screenwriter, who is going to write an historical film. He is on his way to the office of the company producing the film, and in the office of the company there is a conversation where he reflects on the events

he has just seen. But suddenly there is a deluge of photographs—from the period of the struggle for independence in India—which falls out of a cupboard. As the writer and others begin to examine this documentation from the past, the film moves into flashback mode.

Here I wish to invoke Dana Polan's description of a key element within Brechtian aesthetics, where there is a play "between two orders of knowledge, the old and the new." Since history is always based on selections made in the present ("all history of the past is selection of the past"), what is important in history is its usefulness for the present. The Brechtian stratagem of "non-documentary realism", which relies on a stratagem of quotation, may be considered as evoking "a relation of one social text (ideology, a society's representation of itself, and its mythologies) to another text that quotes the first and, so, alters it."[120] Mehta goes some way towards this. He uses the presence of the scriptwriter as a way of highlighting the process of representation itself (indeed of the processes of selection) which the film is going to undertake.

The presence of the scriptwriter is an indication of Mehta's initial application of Brechtian reflexivity in the film. This is the Brechtian stratagem of foregrounding the medium to avoid any simple documented realism, designed to open up possible alternative ways of thinking about the 'reality' in front of one. Social attitudes are foregrounded as well, when a rickshaw driver, taking the screenwriter to the office comments, as another witness to the violence both have just seen:

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[120] Polan, Dana B. "Foundations." *The Political Language of Film and the Avant-garde*. Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985. 5.

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                 Screenwriter
        What dreams we had of our
        freedom? And look what's
        happening…

               Rickshaw Driver
        You're talking about freedom?
        Freedom, Shahib [Sir]? What
        freedom? Whose freedom? Freedom
        for who? Freedom to die of
        hunger? Freedom to get drunk and
        rot? Freedom to be murdered by
        some bully? Or freedom to die
        pointlessly in the riots?...
        Sometimes I feel, Shahib, that
        even slavery was better than
        this freedom.
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This scene suggests that while there is economic progress that advantages some people, social conflicts within the country remain the same. The country is still in chaos as a result of past inequities.

As I apply Polan's account of Brechtian aesthetics to the opening prologue of *Sardar*, I believe that Mehta's representation of contemporary India reveals present day situations and present day circumstances that are in contrast to past events. Present situations and circumstances are declared as unchanged, and an evaluation of past events and decisions within history is designed to impress on the audience the importance of the issues to be raised in the film, and their relevance to the present. Walter Benjamin explains that one of Brecht's aims, as a playwright, was to suggest to his audience that history could be different. This "will inspire a 'change' in the minds of present-day spectators: history may now be different."[121] But while Mehta may have initially intended to apply Brechtian aesthetics throughout the film, after

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[121] Benjamin, Walter. *Understanding Brecht*. Great Britain: Verso, 1998.

the initial stages of the film he does not utilise in any substantial way Brecht's methods of reflexivity or interruption.

Furthermore, while the history presented in the film is unfailingly interesting and rather complicated (particularly for those who do not know the history) given the rate at which complicated political decisions are taken at fast moving meetings, the project of the film is not to raise critical questions about the past, but rather, as established by the monumental tone of the film at key points, to see that past, in a more simplistic way, as a period of courage and self sacrifice which is exemplary for the present. The film does not provide any further analysis of the present, and since the past is being used as a model for the present, it is difficult for that history itself to be fully subjected to critical scrutiny.

In my subsequent discussion, I suggest that this idea that 'history could have been different' would have been one way of further developing *Sardar* as a semi-Brechtian film. Had the film applied various forms of 'interruptions' in the flow of historical events, consideration of alternative historical possibilities that did exist in history could have been taken into account. As the film covers an immense amount of history and is presented at an intense pace, the application of a Brechtian interruption would have had a significant clarifying role. For example, as historical events are speeded up between 3 June 1947 (when independence with partition is announced), and 15 August 1947 (when independence and partition occur), so too do events in the film. Mehta uses a number of techniques to visually speed up events, for example the use of pyrotechnics in the camera movement as the camera circles the table where key negotiations are taking place. Brief, yet rapidly moving

subsequent scenes are also introduced, such as single shots of a calendar page being torn off to announce a new date in the countdown to independence. There is also one sequence where the speed of the rotating panning movement of a camera located in the middle of the negotiating table, increases, as independence leaders read proposed consequences of India's independence, thus producing a dizzying effect. These techniques significantly intensify one's sense of the speed of unfolding historical events, as all the national leaders accept the decision for independence with partition, set for a date six months earlier than previously planned. Clearly Brechtian interruptions would have been more effective, in conveying historical alternatives, than techniques such as these, though their implication is that history at this point was beginning to move too fast.

Various considerations should have been given for the many implications of the decisions being taken by the nation's leaders. Deliberation might have been given by the politicians as to whether it was a good idea to divide the nation into two, especially in the space of some seventy-three days. A Brechtian interruption, or even a number of Brechtian interruptions, would have been able to provide a crucial set of new perspectives in the representation of this extraordinary period in India's complex history. The speeding up of events within the film denied the audience any possibility of contemplating all the options available in the past. Deadlines and ultimatums were imposed on the nationalist leaders by their acceptance of partition with independence by mid August 1947. In fact, historians have criticised the rate at which events were allowed to move at that time, and the opportunities that were lost over these months. Sumit Sarkar believes the leaders' desire for a quick and peaceful accession to power as leaders of the new independent nation state of India, caused

them to fail to recognise their potential strength in the situation and to seek and even bargain for the best option for their new nation.[122]

The following discussion analyses one other aspect of the film style and mise-en-scene that Ketan Mehta employs at points in *Sardar*, aside from the Brechtian stratagems used early within the film. The aspect to be considered is the notion of 'frontality' and related 'iconicity', characteristics widely regarded as culturally specific to Indian visual representation.

Frontality as a trope of style within Indian films was initially developed in the representation of gods in Indian silent cinema. It was used to 'situate the articulation of the mythic within painting, theatre and cinema' and the initial theorisation of the practice was developed by art theorist, Geeta Kapur. Indian film theorist Ravi Vasudevan has elaborated on Kapur's definition of iconic in the Indian context as "an image into which symbolic meanings converge and in which moreover they achieve stasis."[123] According to Vasudevan, one level of frontality in Indian cinema is achieved in the placing of the camera at a 180° plane to the figures and objects within the filmic space:

> This set up may display attributes of direct address, as in the look of characters into the camera, but a frontal, direct address is relayed in other ways, as in the way the knowledge of the spectator is drawn upon in constructing the scene, through the stylised performance, ritual motifs, and

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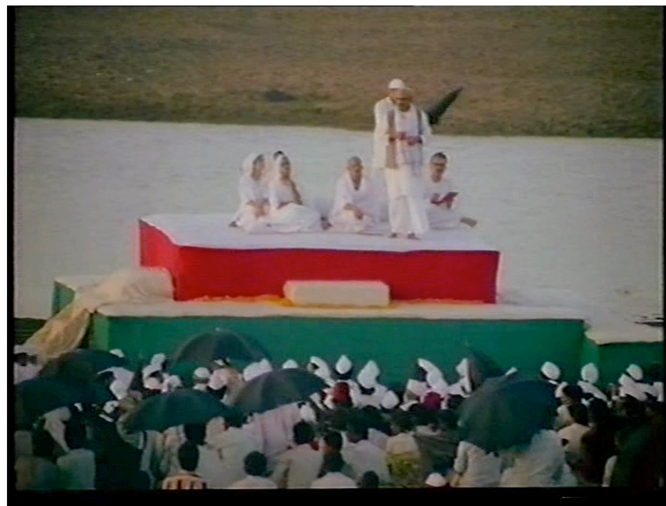
[122] Sarkar, "1945 – 1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 448-449.

[123] Vasudevan, Ravi S. "The Politics of Cultural Address in a 'Transitional' Cinema." *Reinventing Film Studies*. Eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. London: Arnold, 2000. 137-138.

> auditory address that arise from a host of Indian aesthetic and performance traditions.[124]

Elements of frontality are prominent in *Sardar* especially in the first phase of the film as it attempts to establish Patel as 'Sardar'. One example of frontality in the film is at the end of Patel's Bardoli campaign as he addresses and thanks the gathered masses. Patel is standing in a position elevated on a stage above the crowd gathered around him. Patel's elevation above an attentive crowd of listeners creates an almost ritualised scene as he addresses his 'subjects', placing him as a 'godly' figure of authority.

Image 1: An Example of Frontality in the film *Sardar* (1993)



In contrast to Attenborough's combination of naturalism and the epic, the filmic style employed by Ketan Mehta in *Sardar* is dramatic, and at different points, achieving some authenticity through its use of aesthetic systems prevalent in India and resonant with Indian ways of thinking—about the people (for example through popular music), and about their leaders. At the same time it also strives for a kind of monumentalism

[124] Vasudevan, *Reinventing Film Studies* 138,

in its depiction of the achievements of its protagonist, which together with the repression of negative aspects of Patel's career, simplifies its political analysis. In the image above the scene depicted is one that celebrates Sardar Patel's triumph in the exceptional success of the Bardoli satyagraha campaign. The concept of satyagraha is linked to Gandhi, and Gandhi appears in the image, on stage with Patel, thus creating a shot that unites together in the one image, many symbols of the foundation of the nation. To use Geeta Kapur's terms, the symbols "converge in an image that also achieves stasis", and this facilitates the introduction of the titles of the film.

In some ways the historical films *Gandhi* and *Sardar* portray complementary aspects of Indian history in the first half of the twentieth century. *Gandhi* was structured to show the evolution and implementation of the satyagraha movement, whereas *Sardar* focused on Sardar Patel's role as a strong ally of Gandhi's satyagraha, as well as a key figure in the negotiations for independence and the unification of the nation. While the representation of satyagraha is more dominant in *Gandhi*, it plays a crucial role in Sardar Patel's emergence as a leader early in the film. My following discussion investigates the centrality of the satyagraha movement as represented in the two films.

The Role of Satyagraha within the films *Gandhi* and *Sardar*

As earlier mentioned, satyagraha played a critical role in the Indian independence movement, particularly in its early phases. It was a strategy of action that both Gandhi and leaders of the Congress Party employed as a means of mobilising the people towards demanding independence from the British. Satyagraha

evolved from an initial phase of passive resistance in South Africa. An analysis of the narrative order and of the selection of events from history shown in the film *Gandhi* reveal that satyagraha is the primary subject of Attenborough's film. Nevertheless, at a certain point, satyagraha in itself begins to incite violent responses from the British and the Indian people, and Attenborough's film shows this occurring, so the film does not idealise satyagraha as a universally useful tool of political action. The inherent conflicts within satyagraha, where it can in turn lead to violence, even while this is not intended, is also shown at moments in *Sardar*, but only implicitly, as background to events, and Gandhi's own decision to withdraw the satyagraha campaigns on the grounds of their potential to create unwarranted conflicts, is not shown in *Sardar*.

Gandhi in his writings describes how – as the struggle against the British in South Africa advanced – the term passive resistance evolved into satyagraha. Gandhi noted that the term 'passive resistance' had become confusing and it appeared shameful that such a great struggle should be known by an English name. Thus, a competition was placed in the newspaper *Indian Opinion* in search of a more appropriate term.[125] Shri Maganlal Gandhi (one of the competitors) suggested the word "Sadagraha," meaning, "firmness in a good cause," which Gandhi changed to the word "Satyagraha" to mean something more complex:

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[125] *Indian Opinion* was a newspaper founded by Gandhi and two other colleagues (M.H. Nazar and Madanjit Viyavaharik) in South Africa in 1903. It was considered a "key mobilising device" in the early years of the twentieth century for it fostered the idea of one united Indian community. According to Gandhi, "Satyagraha would have been impossible without *Indian Opinion*." Refer to: Uma Dhupelia- Mesthrie. *The Significance of Indian Opinion*. Department of History, University of Western Cape. Address to Conference on the Alternate Media to Commemorate the Centenary of the Founding of *Indian Opinion*, 4 June 2003, Durban.

> Truth (Satya) implies love, and firmness (agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement "Satyagraha," that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence, and gave up the use of the phrase "passive resistance," in connection with it, so much so that even in English writing we often avoided it and used instead the word "Satyagraha" itself or some other equivalent English phrase. This then was the genesis of the movement which came to be known as Satyagraha, and of the word used as a designation for it.[126]

It has also been suggested that Gandhi's gradual evolution of satyagraha (via experimentation in different political and religious contexts) can be traced to his Gujarati background where his family and most of the villagers practiced Hindu-Jainism, a religion that practiced non-violence. Also influential in the development of Gandhi's ideas was the Hindu text of the Bhagavad Gita, which gave detailed instructions for 'crossing the sea of life' and explained how to make every moment of life count, free from anxiety and fear. Though the younger Gandhi was influenced by Western practices of culture and social conduct (as he had studied law in London) through 'experiments' with religion, he returned to the Gita as an ultimate way of life. As a result, the practice of satyagraha became Gandhi's way of life. According to an admirer, his firm belief in the truth gave him the confidence to fearlessly enter conflict for the sake of those around him, without hostility, without resentment, and

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[126] Gandhi, Mohandas K. *Satyagraha in South Africa*. Translated from the Gujarati by Valji Govindji Desai. Introd. to the American ed. by M. J. Chatterjee and Ira Sandperl. Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954. 72. The book was originally published in 1928.

without resorting even to violent words.[127] Satyagraha, as represented in the films contains the following three components: (1) as provocation, (2) as resistance, and (3) as confrontation, for both the provoker and the provokee.

As the film *Gandhi* is structured by three phases of Gandhi's life, so too is the representation of the satyagraha movement. For example, in Attenborough's *Gandhi*, the first form of satyagraha is seen in 1893 South Africa, at its very beginning. Gandhi, having bought a first class ticket is forced to leave his carriage because he is told 'coloureds' are not allowed. Refusing to give up his seat, Gandhi is later thrown off the train. This experience causes Gandhi to establish a movement to fight against the discriminatory treatment of Indian immigrants in South Africa. As a result, in a much more public example of Gandhi's protest, Gandhi stages a peaceful demonstration, rejecting the 1906 Transvaal ordinance on compulsory registration and passes for Indians.[128] As the film shows, in an act of defiance, Gandhi burns his pass, which subsequently results in him being beaten to the ground by police. This is the first instance of Gandhi's satyagraha policy in practice.

The film continues to highlight Gandhi's satyagraha movement as news of his non-violent non-cooperation movement spreads from South Africa to India. Gandhi begins to gain the support of the masses of the Indian people, mostly at the grassroots. Historian Sumit Sarkar believes that Gandhi's success and influence was mainly based on the 'role of rumour' as news of his actions began to spread mostly among

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[127] Easwaran, Eknath. "The Transformation." *Gandhi the Man: the Story of his Transformation*. USA: Nilgiri Press, 1997. 36. Eknath Easwaran is a well-known author of practical books on meditation and the spiritual life. He visited Gandhi because he "wanted to know the secret of his power."

[128] Sarkar, "1917-1927: Mass Nationalism – Emergence and Problems." *Modern India* 178.

the illiterate.[129] However, the film shows Gandhi's utilisation of the print media as early as 1903 in South Africa, as his political campaigns and actions are reported upon by local and international journalists, and becomes a means by which he becomes known. In addition, Gandhi's adoption of peasant dress, prior to his return to India in 1915, further enhanced the impact that his image had on the masses.[130] Through Attenborough's exposition of Gandhi's satyagraha movement in the film, a number of transforming events occur as satyagraha takes root among the Indian people. For example, the film shows the mass reception Gandhi receives in Champaran in 1917 after his return from South Africa. Frankel has succinctly described the impact of all this:

> The new methods of massive but peaceful civil disobedience, introduced under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, were intended to mobilize the passive millions of the rural population for effective boycotts of foreign goods, no-revenue campaigns, and other large-scale civil disobedience movements.[131]

Another significant example of Gandhi's effective implementation of satyagraha that the film depicts is his 1930 Salt satyagraha (or the Salt march). In Gandhi's attempt to oppose British control over salt production in India, Gandhi embarks on a march from Ahmedabad to Dandi. Here, we now have a similar scene as that in South

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[129] Sarkar, "1917-1927: Mass Nationalism – Emergence and Problems." *Modern India* 181.

[130] According to anthropologist, Dr. Rashmi Desai, Gandhi's change in dress created a media presence in his efforts to mobilise the satyagraha movement. Personal communication, 15 February 2008.

[131] Frankel, "Class Conciliation and Class Struggle: Competitive Patterns of Mass Mobilization in Indian Nationalism." *India's Political Economy* 28.

Africa, as along Gandhi's journey, he is joined and accompanied by hundreds of Indian supporters.

According to Bhikhu Parekh, the Salt satyagraha managed to achieve four things: it convinced Indians that colonial rule was vulnerable and that they could end it if only they had the necessary will; it sent out a similar message to the British government and demonstrated the inhumanity of the British; it inflicted a great moral defeat on the colonial government; and finally, it internationalised the Indian struggle for independence and exposed the British government to considerable world pressure.[132] However, as the movement towards independence grew, knowledge of Indian independence with partition began to strain communal relationships, mainly from 1946 to 1947. Conflicts between Hindu and Muslim communities began to escalate and violence broke out on the streets of India. Gandhi's strategy to tackle the violence was to 'fast-till-death' as a form of implementing non-violent, non-cooperation towards the violent mobs. Gandhi's fasts that ranged for numerous numbers of days were miraculously successful in dealing and establishing a fragile truce between the two communities.[133]

The following table summarises the three elements of the satyagraha movement as shown in the film *Gandhi*:

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[132] Parekh, Bhiku. "Life and Work." *Gandhi*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 16.

[133] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 437-438.

Table 5: Satyagraha in the film *Gandhi* (1982)

Scene	Provocation	Resistance	Confrontation (Provokers)	Confrontation (Provokee)
1893 South Africa	Gandhi is racially discriminated while on a train in South Africa.	Gandhi refuses to leave the first class compartment.	The conductor throws Gandhi of the train.	Gandhi decides to fight for the rights of foreign immigrants in South Africa.
Gandhi walks on the streets of Johannesburg towards his office.	Gandhi is verbally abused by a group of South African youths.	Gandhi chooses to hold his ground.	The youths back away.	Gandhi continues safely towards his office.
Gandhi holds a peaceful gathering to protest new travel laws for immigrants.	Police threaten the peaceful gathering with arrests.	Gandhi continues to give his speech and later burns his travel pass.	The police beat Gandhi to the ground.	Gandhi applies passive resistance.
Gandhi holds a peaceful march for the better treatment of miners in South Africa.	Mine owners and police send in stampeding horses to scare the demonstrators.	Gandhi leads the demonstrators and holds their ground.	Mine owners and police are unable to stop the demonstration.	Gandhi succeeds at peacefully gaining and bringing attention to the plight of the miners.
1917 India	Champaran campaign – on arrival by train, Gandhi is arrested for disruption of peace.	Gandhi faces court but explains his actions.	The British courts are forced to release Gandhi.	Gandhi further establishes himself as a figure opposing British law.
1919 Gandhi inaugurates all-India satyagraha	Demand for independence from the British begins.	A peaceful, general strike takes place across India.	Gandhi is arrested and protests break out demanding his release.	Gandhi is released from jail.
13 April 1919*	The Rowlatt Act authorised British imperial authorities to take action at their own discretion.	A group of peaceful demonstrators gather at the Jallianwallabagh market.	Under orders from General Dyer, police open fire on the public.	Hundreds are killed and thousands injured.
1922* Chauri Chaura – first violent response of satyagraha	Peaceful demonstrators are attacked by police on the streets of Chauri Chaura.	The protestors retaliate.	Twenty-two policemen are killed and their police station burnt.	Satyagraha turns violent.
1928 Bardoli campaign	Bombay government announces a revenue-hike.	Organisation of a no-revenue campaign.	Police and landowners raid villages and homes.	British officers and landowners reach a compromise with the people of Bardoli.
1930 The Salt March	Protests against British control of Indian economy, such as salt.	Gandhi walks from Ahmedabad to Dandi in protest against British control of salt.	British authorities baffled by his actions.	Gandhi successfully gains the attention of the international media.
1930-1935 Civil Disobedience campaign	Satyagraha demonstration at Dharasana Salt Works.	Peaceful demonstrators march in protest.	The police beat marching demonstrators.	The incident receives further media coverage.
1942 Quit India movement	Gandhi and Congress leaders call for the British to quit India.	Gandhi and Congress leaders endorse mass demonstrations.	British arrest Gandhi and Congress leaders to reduce their influence on the public.	The Quit India movement begins to lose momentum with the absence of Gandhi and the Congress leaders.
1946 Independence negotiations	Negotiations between the British, Congress leaders and the Muslim League intensify.			
3 June 1947*	Mountbatten announces the date for independence with partition.	Violence breaks out between Hindus and Muslims. Mass migration causes break out of further violence.	The British and Congress leaders are unable to control the violence.	Gandhi begins his 'fast-till-death' campaign. Violence ceases temporarily.

*Incidents and events when satyagraha became violent or instigated violent reactions.

The presence of satyagraha in the film Sardar is more limited. As a member of Gandhi's satyagraha movement, Patel applies satyagraha in his everyday involvement with the people, with considerable success. After the Bardoli campaign, the film moves ahead fifteen years, and here Patel has changed, being presented primarily as a political strategist and statesman, as negotiations for independence begin. With the escalation of the independence movement, pressures of maintaining social order within the nation also become difficult. And with independence drawing closer, violence begins to break out between the Hindus and the Muslims, forcing Patel to make difficult decisions. These difficult situations lead to numerous paradoxes within the film, as Patel's actions and reactions with regards to these public conflicts begin to contradict the principles of satyagraha.

For example, Sardar Patel's principles of satyagraha are tested after Jinnah declares Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946 and riots break out in a number of cities, including Calcutta and Bombay.[134] In the film, Patel receives a phone call from the Police Commissioner in Bombay telling Patel that he needs to resort to force in order to control the street violence. Patel responds by telling him to, "Do what is necessary." However, the Commissioner exclaims, "What about non-violence, Sir?" leaving Patel speechless as he puts down the phone. This scene significantly identifies Patel's dilemma in holding on to the principles of satyagraha, as he finds he is unable to assert any form of control in situations of social disorder. In this instance, the film reveals that Patel's attitude towards satyagraha is also being forced to change. Through the use of dialogue Patel's stance towards satyagraha

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[134] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 432. Direct Action Day is also known as the Great Calcutta Killings. According to Sarkar, from 16 August 1946, India was transformed by communal riots on an unprecedented scale.

begins to change, and lines in the dialogue emphasise his resort to pragmatism. Examples of these lines spoken by Patel are: "A sword for a sword it shall be" and "Sometimes under duress, one has to make decisions which are bitter and painful" and "No price is too heavy to protect one's self respect." These lines reveal Patel's paradoxical position as he is caught between conflicts within the society of the time and his earlier deep commitment to the principles of satyagraha.

Here we have a possible conflict arising from the nature of satyagraha itself: it is not a stratagem that can always be invoked. On the other hand these scenes in the film are designed to show the characteristics of Patel himself, and his role as the nation's strong man and enforcer as he tries to 'manage' the state. Thus, while the techniques that Patel employs in taking action, as seen in the film, are sometimes presented as unorthodox and questionable, the film endorses Patel's methods, which enabled the securing of the state. It is worth noting that the actor, Paresh Rawal, who played Patel in the film, had previously been known for playing the role of gangsters in popular Indian movies. Some film critics in India, not entirely sympathetic to Patel and his role in Indian history, have thought it very appropriate that this actor played Patel.[135]

As a whole, Attenborough's *Gandhi* presents the satyagraha movement in its most favourable light. But it also reveals Gandhi as an ethical and strategic thinker. Nevertheless, the behaviour of the colonial authorities and others in the period of the struggle for independence was at times at times more violent than the film chooses to reveal. While the film shows us the massacres at Amritsar and Chauri Chaura, it does

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[135] Moinak Biswas, personal communication to David Hanan, July 2000.

not show the upsurge of violence after Gandhi was imprisoned in 1942, particularly the deliberate use of violence by those who did not agree with satyagraha as a stratagem. Nevertheless the film does show an important success of satyagraha. As a campaign it drew international attention to the struggle for independence in India, attention that was sympathetic to the plight of Indians and admiring of the stratagems used.

***Gandhi* and *Sardar* as Historical Films depicting National Issues**

Attention now needs to be drawn to the contrasting differences between *Gandhi* and *Sardar* as national historical films. In contrast to *Gandhi*, Ketan Mehta's film *Sardar* has a direct relation to notions of the *national* on two grounds. Firstly, *Sardar* was made by an Indian director, working entirely in India. The film is about the foundation and unification of the Indian nation at a time of great difficulty, with many forces threatening to tear it apart. The film's theme differs from Attenborough's depiction of satyagraha, which begins and ends with the death of the man who invented it, and not with the emergence of India as a nation. Secondly, as noted earlier, *Sardar* was funded and produced by groups closely associated with Sardar Patel himself. The film is a commemorative biography of the man whom they regard as having unified the nation at the time of independence and partition. In addition, the film also received some funding from the government in power at the time, the Congress Party, which at the time the film was made, had ruled India ever since independence.

The film *Sardar* created something of a precedent, enabling the making of further historical films about the period of struggle for independence, not for the cinema, but for television.[136] In the mid-1980s the Congress Party had encouraged the making of films about Hindu myths specifically for screening on state television, known as Doordashan. Most influential was a mammoth television series, running for many episodes, entitled *Ramayan*, dramatizing aspects of the *Ramayana*.[137] The *Ramayana* series was a big success for Doordashan, attracting a huge audience, much to the regret of the Congress Party, which had initiated it, for ultimately it was realised that the series had produced an increasing groundswell of support for the centre-right opposition party, the Hindu fundamentalist party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, founded in 1980).[138] The television series *Ramanand* had such an impact in the late 1980s, that Hindu fundamentalist politics played an increasing role in India. The BJP sought to divide the secular nation over important sectarian issues in the 1990s. One notable controversy was over the building in Ayodhya of a Hindu temple to Lord Ram on the site of an old mosque—known as the Babri mosque. Campaigns led by Hindu fundamentalists resulted in the destruction of this mosque in an attack on the mosque on 6 December 1992. More than two thousand people were killed in riots that followed in India and Pakistan. The BJP sectarian campaigns

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[136] Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* 1999.

[137] The programme initially went to air on Sunday mornings from early January 1987 to the end of July1988. It ran for seventy-eight episodes, and served as a kind of foundation myth for the unity of the Indian sub-continent. See the following website for a brief critical introduction and promotion of this series: http://hindiserials.blogspot.com/2007/11/doordarshan-nostalgia-mythology.html

[138] For an account of the production of the TV serial *Ramanand* by state television, Doordashan, and its subsequent effect on Indian politics, see Arvind Rajagopal *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

resulted in this party displacing Congress as the national government of India in the elections of 1998, and remaining in power until 2004.

The impact of a national historical film such as *Sardar* is in the way it supplies material for enhancing foundation myths of the nation, particularly in reminding its audiences of the prominent role of the Congress Party in the negotiations to independence. Such a film has a dual status, simultaneously representing the past, and using this representation as a way of producing discourses for the present. In its opening scenes, *Sardar* attempts to establish a Brechtian-like link between the past and the present. Nevertheless, as already suggested, the film does not find a way of continuing to explore the 'here' and 'now' of India, particularly the question it implicitly raises, why (after nearly fifty years of Congress Party rule) the nation should be in the calamitous state as depicted at the opening of the film. Rather the film focuses entirely on a representation of the past as an era of exemplary heroism, which the present should emulate. Ideologically *Sardar* can be considered a Congress film as it celebrates the achievements of the Congress leadership at the time of independence, even while questioning the current state of Indian society. The film, while initially drawing attention to social failures in 1993 India, ends up highlighting the accomplishments of the nation's leaders leading up to independence.

In a critical re-examination of the period of the struggle for independence, and of myths, state ideologies and misperceptions (or incomplete and partial perceptions) of the period, possibly the most influential scholar in India to have engaged with this question of a re-examination of history is the post-colonial theorist

and revisionary historian, Partha Chatterjee.[139] Chatterjee's extensive research studied the nature of Gandhi's satyagraha stratagem and showed how it evolved to become a means by which ordinary Indian people, many of them very poor, were mobilised to support the campaign for independence initiated by the emerging nation's leaders. Chatterjee suggests that satyagraha formed an essential plank in the campaign to achieve independence, without which Congress may not have succeeded in achieving independence so soon. However, Chatterjee argues that while Congress adopted and followed through the principles of satyagraha, the social vision of influential Congress members such as Patel and Nehru differed widely from that of Gandhi, who wanted to use the village as the starting point for social development, and saw economic development not only in village terms, but believed that the only way to achieve social justice for Indians was to transform the village.

Patel, for example, believed primarily in the importance of industrial development, with the state working in league with industry. Nehru, who as the first Prime Minister of India steered newly independent India for seventeen years, before his death in 1964, had eventually came to hold similar views to Patel. Although initially Nehru was a democratic socialist, ultimately Nehru came to believe that development should primarily be achieved by industrialisation, with some assistance from central planning by the state. Economic historian Francine Frankel has argued that although in the early years of independence Nehru attempted to implement some of Gandhi's policies, these policies were abandoned, not being seen as successful.[140]

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[139] Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a Derivative Discourse?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

[140] Frankel, "Introduction: the Paradox of Accommodative Politics and Radical Social Change." *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004* 4.

Chatterjee takes a stronger line than Frankel, arguing that in effect Gandhi's satyagraha was appropriated by Congress, as a way of bringing the masses into the struggle for independence, but that Congress then failed to implement his social vision. Chatterjee critiques the dominant groups within Indian society, and the complicity of Congress with business elites, showing how over time the Congress Party failed to develop the nation in an equitable way.

The need for social development at the village level is shown briefly in Attenborough's film, with Gandhi setting up ashrams, and in his implementation of the spinning of khadi as a method of encouraging village-based industries. However the film does not establish Gandhi's social reform as a critical point of the satyagraha movement. The film *Gandhi* in no way addresses Gandhi's fuller political position, articulated by Partha Chatterjee, as a man who had both a stratagem for winning independence, and a social vision for the future nation, a social vision that was to remain seriously unfulfilled. In the film *Gandhi*, Gandhi's vision of a future India being developed via developing the rural areas is seriously truncated. In *Sardar* it makes no appearance in the film at all.

Differing Perceptions of History: The Coloniser and the Colonised

While the earlier discussion addressed the two films within the context of national issues, the following discussion explores the contrasting attitudes towards the colonising British, as represented in the films. For while Attenborough's *Gandhi* 'humanises' the British within the film, Mehta often presents a more satirical view of the relationship between the British colonisers and the Indian people. This differing

perspective (of colonisers and the colonised) demonstrates that history can be told from various points of view, and that no 'take' on history is the 'right' one.

As mentioned above, the reading of a biography inspired Attenborough's *Gandhi*, and although Attenborough consulted numerous authorities, both British and Indian, with regards to the life of Mahatma Gandhi, the script was drafted from a number of perspectives over a number of years, and by various screenwriters, before Attenborough finalised the script with John Briley. However, because *Gandhi's* director and scriptwriter were both Westerners, this resulted in not only a differing perspective towards Indian history, but also a cultural gap between the film's makers and the diegetic world they were creating.

Obvious Westernisation within *Gandhi* is in the way the film concentrates on Gandhi's Western associates both in India and in South Africa. For example, in South Africa Gandhi makes the acquaintance of an English clergyman, with whom the film very frequently shows him in discussion. Upon his return to India, Gandhi gains the attention of Western reporters. The film shows this with the introduction of American journalist reporter, Walker (played by Martin Sheen) and *Life*-photographer Margaret Bourke White (played by Candice Bergen). Later an Englishwoman follower, Mirabehn, the daughter of an English aristocrat, joins Gandhi at his ashram. At no point in the film does an Indian advisor, such as Gandhi's personal assistant of twenty-five years, Mahadev Desai, appear as a character in the film, nor are women members of his own family, very important in the later stages of his life, given the same attention as Mirabehn. Even the scene of Gandhi's funeral procession at the beginning of the film, is documented and

commented upon by Western journalists rather than by Indian journalists. Presumably, Attenborough's extensive concentration on Gandhi's Western friends and associates, rather than on his close Indian associates, was felt to be a means of making Gandhi more accessible to Western audiences.

The Westernisation of the film *Gandhi* derives not only from the high proportion of Western characters who appear in the film, but from the well known British and American actors who play them, bringing with them acting and dialogue codes, and performance styles, well known from films made in Britain and America. Actors of British and American origin are seen consistently throughout, an approach unlikely to be applied by an Indian filmmaker (out of the approximate 28-member main cast, nineteen actors were Westerners). Numerous distinguished actors from the British stage and screen were employed to represent leading officials of the British realm, such as Viceroys (in Michael Hordern, John Gielgud and John Mills), and in one case, a sympathetic judge (in Trevor Howard). This decision may have been made in order to increase acceptance of the film by Western audiences, but the selection of distinguished actors has an effect on the style of their performances as prestige and dignity are accorded to the historical personages they represent. Characters such as the Viceroys are presented as inept at times, bewildered by Gandhi's actions, and likely to take retaliatory action even if ineffective. But overall, they are shown as civilised, educated men, with feelings, played by distinguished British actors.

The feelings of the administrators are particularly emphasised, using a style of performance perhaps having origins in Stanislavskian method acting, but reaching

a high standard of professionalism in British theatre. Multiple levels of psychological depth and the humanity of the personality come to the fore. This is in contrast to a Brechtian aesthetic where social contexts, ironies and social consequences would be foregrounded in stylised performances and feelings are less prioritised. Additionally, the film at times draws on types of comedy well known in British cinema from at least the 1930s on, but further developed in the British cinema of the 1950s and later in British television. For example:

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                 Gandhi
     Most people would prefer poor
     government by their own leaders
     than better government by a
     foreign power.
            English official
     But India is British – you can't
     get away from that.
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A further example is as follows:

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English official to another English official
       Non-violent non- cooperation? I
       thought they were actually going
       to do something.
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In the first comic exchange above, involving a serious statement by Gandhi and an absurd response from the British official, comedy is used to draw attention to the inanity of British officialdom, and the simple truths with which the Congress leadership opposed British policies, and this is certainly relevant to the Indian situation. The second example is more in the line of dialogue from a television program such as *Yes, Minister*. There are moments of near comedy in *Sardar*, but they are moments that in a deeper way open up the Indian distrust of the British, as we shall see.

With regard to the representation of the British in the film, an impression is also given that there are differences too in the way in which the upper levels of the British administration are represented, in contrast to the lower levels of the British colonial administration. For example, in South Africa it is the lower class British police officers who are shown to perpetrate violence, and in India it is the boorish lower class British magistrates, consigned to the provinces, who make administrative messes or are bamboozled by Gandhi. While there are exceptions, such as the behaviour of General Dyer, the film comes close to presenting the problems of British India as an effect of the British class system. While the upper class bureaucrats are human, the working class such as the military and minor administrators are played as less human. This is repeated in turn in the choice of actors where it is the well known, prestigious actors who play the upper class roles, while minor actors play those directly engaging with Indians and with Gandhi. Attenborough's *Gandhi* is thus, to a certain extent, a film structured by the institutions and codes of British cinema and British society in its representation of the Indian nation, reflecting more the nation that produced it rather than the nation it was representing.

The representation of the British in *Sardar* on the other hand, is different in a number of ways. One example is the scene showing Sardar Patel's first meeting with Mountbatten, played by Indian-American actor, Tom Alter.[141] Generally, as a person, Mountbatten is represented in the film as amiable, efficient, friendly, personable, and determined to get things done quickly, but occasionally superficial. However, a

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[141] Tom Alter is an Indian actor of American origin, and is talented in his fluency of Hindi and Indian culture. He has also worked on a number of Indian films including by noted filmmaker Satyajit Ray in *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* ('The Chess Player,' 1977).

number of scenes in *Sardar* present a subtly ironic perspective on Mountbatten. For example, upon Mountbatten's arrival in Delhi on 24 March 1947, he rapidly initiates meetings with the Indian leaders, interviewing 133 Indian leaders and their advisors within approximately six weeks of his arrival.[142] Mehta and his screenwriter dramatise Mountbatten's first interview with Patel in the following dialogue:

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                  Mountbatten
        I'm a military man, not a
        politician. But do tell me Mr.
        Patel, how did you come into
        politics?

                     Patel
        Your Excellency, I am not
        here to talk about myself.
        The situation here is very
        grave. I would like to talk
        about that.

                  Mountbatten
        But Mr. Patel, to understand
        the situation here, I also
        need to understand you and
        the other leaders.

                     Patel
        This is not the time to talk
        about personal matters, Your
        Excellency. I have come here
        to discuss with you what we
        would expect from our new
        Viceroy.

                  Mountbatten
        Please don't be offended Mr.
        Patel, but along with your
        opinions I would also like to
        get to know you.

Patel stands up.

                     Patel
        Then, I shall take my leave.

Mountbatten stands hurriedly.
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[142] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 448.

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                  Mountbatten
            Please wait, Mr. Patel. I've
            heard a great deal about you
            and it's all very correct.
            Tell me...

Patel invites Mountbatten to sit.

                  Mountbatten
            Thank you.
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In this pointed scene in the film, Patel's refusal to continue his introductory meeting with Mountbatten can be read in a number of ways. Mountbatten declares to Patel that he wants to get to know him. This might be seen as simply too friendly an overture, which is rebuffed by a more cautious and reserved Patel. But there is surely more to this scene than this. I suggest that the scene speaks volumes about the differences between the colonised and the colonising. India, having been colonised for over 150 years, and Patel, having been through a campaign already lasting thirty years to end colonisation, like most colonised subjects, has little faith in the word of a British man. His attitude towards the British is hidden behind many layers of masking and reserve. Mountbatten, on the other hand, in his role as the last Viceroy, assumes that the best way to deal with the Indian leaders is by being as open as possible, without any hint of racial difference or power. As a result, Mountbatten is portrayed in the film as seemingly naïve as he assumes that years of conflicting differences can be swept aside.

Mountbatten's opening gambit in the scene betrays this lack of comprehension. But in the scene Patel diplomatically points out that the discussion is not personal and that a suitable course of action for the future of India needs to be prioritised. Mountbatten's initial surprise, and his body language as a whole, suggests that the men are not meeting on equal terms. The kind of personal relation

that Mountbatten seeks is inappropriate because the entire history of British colonialism in India, and what it had meant to the Indians, is something that Mountbatten is unable to grasp. A scene such as this could hardly be written by a British scriptwriter, and no scenes like this are depicted in Attenborough's *Gandhi.*

Mountbatten however, is not always shown as naive. His skills as a statesman are shown when he adeptly 'handles' the intractable Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League. At a certain point, in early June 1947, Mountbatten realises that he must finally get Jinnah, who rarely agrees to anything, to agree to follow the plan that is finally adopted, Plan Partition, also known as the Mountbatten-Nehru deal.[143] Mountbatten believes that time is running out, and because he has finally got the Congress Party to agree to accept independence with partition, he believes that now is the time for Jinnah to cooperate. Mountbatten told Jinnah that when the moment came for him to verbalise his agreement at the forthcoming meeting with Congress leaders, he need not actually say anything, but that Mountbatten would say what Jinnah had agreed to, and Jinnah would simply nod. The film subsequently shifts to a scene showing the meeting with Congress Party leaders, where the carefully calculated nod devised by Mountbatten for Jinnah, is implemented. This moment, known as 'Jinnah's nod', a moment upon which a momentous development in history depends, is celebrated by historians with a sense of amusement because it graphically illustrates the difficulty of the negotiations with Jinnah.

The pivotal role played by Mountbatten (a recently arrived newcomer to the Indian situation) has been much discussed by Indian historians. According to Sarkar,

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[143] Moore, *Escape from Empire* 296.

Indian historians have criticised the Western-originating cult surrounding Mountbatten as an exaggeration, for it depicts Mountbatten as "a super statesman-cum-Prince Charming who solved the sub-continent's problems in record time through a combination of military forthrightness, sheer personality and tact."[144] According to Sarkar, if indeed Mountbatten proved more decisive and quick in making decisions than previous Viceroys (such as Wavell), a claim that is part of the myth, it was because he had been given much greater power to do so. According to R.J. Moore, Mountbatten's decision for Britain to quit India by granting independence seven months earlier than initially planned was based on his fear that a prolonged delay would lead to the British being unable to exercise authority or take responsibility for events taking place, which at any time might get out of hand. Indeed Mountbatten, in a note written at the time, compared India to a ship on fire: "The ship is on fire, but the fire has not yet reached the magazines."[145] It was not, of course, Mountbatten who suggested Partition as the solution. The suggestion for withdrawal from India accompanied by partition had been made officially to the British government by Viceroy Wavell as early as September 1946. However, it was during Mountbatten's term of office, the date for independence was antedated from March 1948 to mid August 1947. Sarkar makes this judgement of Mountbatten:

> Mountbatten was responsible for the break-neck speed at which the whole process of negotiations and transfer of power was carried out, but this left

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[144] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 447.

[145] Moore, "Plan Partition." *Escape from Empire* 237-238.

> many anomalies in arranging partition details, and totally failed to prevent the Punjab massacre.[146]

Therefore, while Attenborough 'humanises' the role of the British in *Gandhi*, Mehta in *Sardar* identifies the role of the British as intrusive. In the British refusal to take responsibility for the future of their former colony, now a 'rebellious' India, hasty alternatives were taken to grant India its independence. As a result, the new nation's leaders agreed to independence with partition at the same time accepting an impossible and dangerous time frame in which it was to occur.

Historical Absences in *Gandhi* and *Sardar*

Due to the large span of history that is covered in both *Gandhi* and *Sardar*, the histories represented in these two films involve forms of compression and simplification. As a result, there are a number of specific historical events or issues that the two films exclude. The following discussion therefore addresses the issue of historical events that are absent from or sparsely represented within the film. The discussion attempts to explain reasons for this exclusion and determine the cause and effect this exclusion may have on the overall representation of India's independence movement. My discussion below takes two approaches. Firstly it focuses on key events that are excluded. Secondly, it also deals with the real complexity of some events that are only briefly shown.

[146] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 448.

– The Deteriorating Relationship between Congress and the Muslim League

The deteriorating relationship between Congress and the Muslim League can be traced back to the end of 1927, when initially, prospects for the emergence of one unified nation seemed achievable. Sarkar sets up the deteriorating relationship between the two parties as follows:

> Practically all established political groups decided to boycott the Simon Commission and began preparing for an All-Parties Conference to draw up a constitution. Already at a conference in Delhi in March 1927, Jinnah had persuaded a number of Muslim leaders to come out with a compromise formula. Separate electorates would be given up in return for joint electorates with reserved seats for minorities, a promise of one-third Muslim representation in the Central Assembly, representation in proportion to population in Punjab and Bengal, and three new Muslim-majority provinces.[147]

However, while Jinnah's offer had been accepted by the Congress Party, Hindu-communalist pressure from Punjab and Maharashtra soon forced a disastrous retreat. Sarkar explains how participants at the All-Parties Conference, which met in Delhi in February 1928, became embroiled in tortuous negotiations and squabbles on the issue of communal representation. As a result, Jinnah would accuse Congress leaders of going back on their 1927 promises. It is believed that Jinnah made a final and desperate attempt at unity in the last session of the December 1928 All-Parties Conference in Calcutta. Jinnah pleaded for the following: an immediate separation of

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[147] Sarkar, "1928-1937:Nationalist Advance and Economic Depression." *Modern India* 262.

Sind, residual powers to provinces, one-third of Central Assembly seats for Muslims, and reserved seats in Punjab and Bengal. However, the Mahasabha leader, M.R. Jayakar brushed aside Jinnah's pleas for a compromise. As a result, Jinnah forwarded his famous 'Fourteen Points' on 28 March 1929. Jinnah's Fourteen Points Plan was a constitutional plan to safeguard the political rights of Muslims in a self-governing India. Jinnah would later describe the acceptance by the All-Parties Conference of Jayakar's standpoint as the 'parting of the ways'.[148] Sarkar concludes that the 1928 breakdown of negotiations contributed to the aloofness and positive hostility of most Muslim leaders towards Civil Disobedience two years later, in 1930.[149]

Neither of the films *Gandhi* and *Sardar* shows this unfolding conflict between the Muslim League and Congress within the films. While the films highlight the tension between Jinnah and Congress, specific details of how the conflict between the two groups began are not addressed. However, in *Sardar*, efforts for reconciliation are shown in the actions of Gandhi as he attempts to 'pacify' Jinnah. In July 1944 Gandhi proposed talks with Jinnah, and, much to the reluctance of Congress leaders (such as Nehru and Patel), offered Jinnah the opportunity to become the first Prime Minister of India. However, by September 1944 the Gandhi-Jinnah talks broke down as Jinnah believed that Gandhi's offer was insincere, and accused Congress of making empty promises.[150]

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[148] Singh, Jaswant. "Sharpening Focus – Narrowing Options." *Jinnah: India – Partition – Independence*. New Delhi: Rupa. Co., 2009. 166, 629-630.

[149] Sarkar, "1928-1937:Nationalist Advance and Economic Depression." *Modern India* 263.

[150] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 415-416.

Following the break down of the 1944 Gandhi-Jinnah talks, and in efforts to discuss the future of an independent India, Wavell organised the Simla Conference (25 June-14 July 1945) in order to set up a new Executive Council that would be entirely Indian (except for the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief). According to Sarkar, Wavell proposed that caste Hindus, and Muslims, would have equal representation within the Executive Council. However, Congress objected, and insisted on the right to include members of all communities among its nominees for the Executive Council. Nevertheless, it is believed that the conference broke down especially due to Jinnah's intransigent demands that:

> The League had an absolute right to choose all the Muslim members and that there should be a kind of communal veto in the Executive, with decisions opposed by Muslims needing a two-third majority.[151]

These demands by the Muslim League were considered demands which neither Wavell nor Congress were willing to oblige. In addition, while Wavell proposed ideas for a united India with Congress in agreement, Jinnah disagreed and pushed his idea for a separate Muslim state. As a result, this caused other ethnic groups to call for their own independent states as well.

The film *Sardar* does dramatise some moments in these negotiations, and provides examples of a number of alternatives from which Congress leaders could choose after the 1945 Simla Conference, such as Wavell's Plan A (the formation of a Union) and Plan B (the formation of two nations).[152] The fact that possibilities and

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[151] Sarkar, "1945-1947: Freedom and Partition." *Modern India* 416-417.

[152] Wavell proposes Plan A – the whole of India will constitute one Union, and the provinces will be divided according to Hindu and Muslim populations. The Union will only have control over foreign

options are addressed in *Sardar* provides insight into the complexities of reaching an agreement for all parties involved, in contrast to *Gandhi*, which only presents a token glimpse of the politics of this period.

– Plan Balkan and Plan Partition

On 24 March 1947 Mountbatten arrived in New Delhi as the last Viceroy of India. Mountbatten had instructions from the British Labour government to produce a settlement with Congress leaders as soon as possible, so that independence could be achieved no later than March 1948. Nearly two years after the Simla Conference, Mountbatten privately presented Nehru with a plan, ironically code named by the British, as Plan Balkan.

Plan Balkan, which had gone though a number of drafts both in Delhi and in London, and was shown by Mountbatten to Nehru on the night of 10/11 May 1947, appeared to involve the devolution of power from the British government not to a central government, but to the principalities.[153] Mountbatten's proposal for the 'Balkanization' of India into its approximate number of 550 principalities, however was rejected by Nehru vehemently in a letter delivered to Mountbatten the next morning as he rapidly opted for an alternative plan, drawn up earlier by constitutional advisor and civil servant V. P. Menon, which accepted partition.[154] Mountbatten flew to London seeking agreement there, and on his return to Delhi

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affairs, defence and communications while the rest of the power will remain with the provinces. Plan B – a Partition of India, in which two nations will be formed; Hindustan and Pakistan, and Punjab's Hindus and Muslims will also be divided.

[153] Moore, "Plan Partition." *Escape from Empire* 243-272.

[154] Moore, "Plan Partition." *Escape from Empire* 267-268.

announced that independence had been agreed to, and a day later, at a press conference on 3 June 1947, gave the date of independence with partition as 15 August 1947, less than two and a half months away. Nehru's rejection of Plan Balkan, and the subsequent adoption of Plan Partition and its implementation constituted a major part of the drama of *Sardar*. Among key scenes in the film depicting this transitional period are: scenes of Mountbatten interviewing Indian leaders in the six weeks after his arrival, Nehru's rejection of Plan Balkan, and the adoption and announcement of partition. Additionally there are scenes where Jinnah is induced to agree to Plan Partition. These are followed by an important and lengthy section of the film, where administrative arrangements for dividing the country into two nations are put in place, and in which Patel figures prominently.

To some extent the film *Sardar* contains an impressive amount of history, certainly enough to make a viewer curious to explore the history for themselves. However, at the same time, it is a complex history to tell. Indeed, in the film quite a few aspects of history are represented with almost the same kind of complexity that they are in some historical studies. For example, there is a page in Sankar Ghose's *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, published at about the time the film was made, which provides an account of Nehru's celebrated rejection of Mountbatten's Plan Balkan at Simla on 11 May 1947 to which the account in the film corresponds in all relevant details.[155]

On the other hand, here I should reiterate in what ways the narrative of the film is simplified. One way is that the very pyrotechnics of the film do not allow for

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[155] Reference to the biography on Nehru is: Moraes, Frank. *Jawaharlal Nehru: a Biography*. New York: MacMillan, 1956.

a kind of Brechtian interruption – in the rush of an exceptionally rapidly moving history – which might allow for alternative possibilities, ignored or suppressed by the history-making protagonists, to have been aired. Moreover, it is not only alternative possibilities for a future arrangement of India that do not get explored in any detail in the film. The very question of why the movement to independence was accelerated is not explored in the film. It is simply a fact, indeed a fact that facilitates the film's extraordinary style of exposition. Additionally the rejection of Plan Balkan by Nehru at Simla, is used as a turning point in the film, that produces a consensus among the main members of Congress that there is no other choice except partition, and ushers in the next phase of the film, that deals with the planning for partition and independence.

Some historians have suggested that the mysterious Plan Balkan was not so absolute in its intentions, that it did not devolve power to principalities, but simply gave to the principalities the right to choose whether they would join with Pakistan or with India.[156] On the other hand, Y. Krishan and R.J. Moore have argued in some detail that Plan Balkan, did devolve power to the principalities. But Krishnan suggests it was such an outrageous proposal that it could not possibly have been seriously entertained by the British, but was perhaps a clever ruse used by Mountbatten and his circle to push the Congress leadership into more quickly accepting the lesser evil of partition, and the creation of Pakistan, as one of the consequences of independence. Krishan also argues that at the same time, Mountbatten probably made a deal with Congress offering them an earlier date for

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[156] Read, Anthony and Fisher, David. *The Proudest Day: India's Long Road to Independence*. London: Pimlico, 1998.

independence if India accepted continuing membership of the British Commonwealth, something that in the first half of 1947 Congress had continued to reject, even though it was keenly hoped for by King George VI (who had personally requested it).[157]

What this suggests is that behind an event that is represented in a film there may be a series of other events, not shown in the film, but providing a context and a motivation different from the way an event appears on screen, but subject to further investigation and debate and dispute via historians writing in books, and journal articles and reviews. Furthermore, Read and Fisher as well as Krishan (and V. P. Menon in his *Transfer of Power*) affirm that Patel himself had earlier been keen to keep India as part of the Commonwealth after decolonisation, and saw this as a bargaining chip with which the departure of the British and the coming of independence, with government by Congress, could be accelerated.[158] Sarkar also suggests that one of the reasons for the dangerously hastened move to independence (with partition to be organised simultaneously) was the increasing desire of the Congress leadership to take over the reins of government itself.

– The Communal Restructuring and Division of the Police and Army

However, (and this was not fully understood at the time in the lead up to independence) rather than partition being a means of preventing communal violence,

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[157] Y. Krishan. "Mountbatten and the Partition of India." *History* (The Journal of the Historical Association), (222) 1983. 22-38.

[158] Reference to V.P. (Vapal Pangguni) Menon's book is: V.P. Menon. *Transfer of Power.* London: Longman, 1957.

the very idea of partition in the lead up to independence increased communal violence, even as a rapid move to partition was intended to be a means of reducing it. Nor, according to Krishan, was it initially believed that when partition occurred numerous people would see it necessary to cross borders. Ultimately, when the supposedly conflict-reducing partition occurred in mid August 1947, millions of Hindus and Muslims crossed borders between the India and the newly formed Pakistan.[159] In *Sardar*, Congress is seen as initially resisting partition and then accepting it, and the process of its implementation being accelerated. But Congress's possible involvement in the decision to accelerate the movement to independence, suggested by a number of historians, is not revealed in the film's narration of a history that the film largely sees as inevitable.

The question of why there was so much violence during the days of partition has also been explored in detail by Krishan. In both films, the violence appears to be a spontaneous eruption of communal violence, fuelled by fear, frustration, and disappointment as well as by sectarian hatreds exacerbated by the seeming ultimatum produced for many by partition. But Krishan argues in some detail and with undeniable logic, that a major reason for the unrestrained social unrest was the hasty restructuring of army and police divisions along sectarian lines in the two months prior to independence. This restructuring was implemented without much thought being given to the consequences of such a restructuring, and without time to prepare for local exigencies. But planning was essential, given that for some time reduction

[159] Metcalf & Metcalf, "The 1940s: Triumph and Tragedy." *A Concise History of India* 218. Metcalf & Metcalf suggest that within a period of three to four months in late 1947 a number of 5 million Hindus and Sikhs moved from West Punjab into India, while 5.5 million Muslims travelled in the opposite direction. The outcome, Metcalf & Metcalf claim is akin to 'ethnic cleansing'. Overall, Partition uprooted an estimated 12.5 million of a population of 40 million people.

in violence had been achieved in many communities by ensuring that appropriate squads of sympathetic army or police personnel were present to protect vulnerable minority communities. Krishan explains:

> It was decided by the Partition Council [on 30 June 1947] to effect a rough and ready division of the armed forces on a communal basis, that is, immediate movement to Pakistan of all Muslim majority units and movement to India of all non-Muslim majority units. …As a result, minorities in certain areas of India and Pakistan were left without the protection which the armed forces provided in times of commotion and disorder and which civil services, especially the police, provided in normal times. …It is ironical that the instrument, that is the administrative machinery, which alone could be used to contain the communal passions, had itself become communalized.[160]

Krishan cites the report of the Commander of the Boundary force, that the disarming of Muslim police by the new Hindu Superintendent of police in Amritsar resulted not only in panic in Muslim populations there, but unrest among those Muslim police who now wished to take their families away under military escort. Krishan continues:

> If government employees enjoying the protection of the guarantee given by Mountbatten regarding their terms and conditions of service felt unsafe in a Dominion in which they belonged to the minority community, a minority community could not be expected to feel safe and stay put in its ancestral homes. The partisan handling of the communal strife by the services, especially the police, in the Punjab and Bengal a little before and after

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[160] Y. Krishan, *History* (The Journal of the Historical Association) 34.

> partition had undermined completely the faith of the minorities in being able to live in Pakistan and partitioned areas of India with honour and to enjoy protection of their life and property from the governments. Now the total communalization of services, especially the police and the armed forces, blasted the slender hopes of minorities that they might stay on in the areas to which they belonged.[161]

This is a structural account of why so many people shifted country (when this was not a requirement of partition) and why so much communal violence flared up in unrestrained ways during the partition period, with such loss of life. According to Krishan, people did not shift country because they were obliged, or because they wanted to, but because staying where they were was now considered unsafe. Krishan concludes: "the holocaust that attended the partition and the mass migration that took place were not inherent in the partition, but were a consequence of the communal division of the services."[162] Sardar Patel was the chairman of the committee that was ultimately responsible for the decision to divide the services (army and police) entirely on communal lines, mistakenly seeing this as both a precautionary move as well as an efficient reorganisation of public services. I have not been able to establish whether Patel himself actually advocated the communalisation of the army and police, or whether his committee approved a recommendation coming from a sub-committee.

However, this structural historical explanation, seeing the explanation for the violence, and even the explanation for the large shifts in populations, in the removal

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[161] Y. Krishan, *History* (The Journal of the Historical Association) 35.

[162] Y. Krishan, *History* (The Journal of the Historical Association) 22-38.

of protective services from minority communities, by an administrative committee lacking in foresight regarding its own policies, due at the very least to the short time left to plan for partition, is not shown in the film *Sardar.* Rather, in the film, the spectacle of violence is presented as though self explanatory, and the film itself systematically celebrates the achievements of those (including Patel) who undertook such huge administrative tasks in such a short time, only to be disappointed by the violent outbreaks of violence in various sectors of the population. Furthermore, the question of why independence was antedated from March 1948 to August 1947 is one question the film never addresses, presenting it as a *fait accompli* of Mountbatten and the British government. However, Krishan suggests (as do others) that this was a deal made by Mountbatten with Congress members at the suggestions of Patel, a deal that satisfied the British because it ensured that decolonised India remained in the Commonwealth, and so encouraged them to advance the date for independence to 15 August 1947. So Patel and Nehru, keen to be rid of the British, were able to take over the reins of power sooner than was originally planned.

– Alternative Perspectives on the Independence Struggle: R.C. Majumdar

Historian R.C. Majumdar proposes a different perspective on Gandhi and events leading up to India's independence. In his book *Three Phases of India's Independence Struggle for Freedom,* although praising Gandhi for the role he did play, Majumdar questions what he sees as the emerging myth that Gandhi's satyagraha movement was the main contributing factor to India achieving independence. Majumdar argues that there were other significant contributing factors

that led to India's independence in 1947.[163] One factor is an early militant nationalism that, according to Majumdar, paved the way for acceptance of Gandhi as a leader in 1915, and re-emerged in the 1940s, particularly over the years that Gandhi was imprisoned by the British after having initiated the "Quit India" campaign at a time when Britain was at war. A striking example of this militant nationalism of the 1940s is to be found in Subhas Chandra Bose, a Bengali politician and former Congress President, who formed an alliance with the Japanese and led a brigade of Indians to fight alongside them in Burma against British and allied forces.[164] Another contributing factor was the weakness of Britain at the end of World War Two. Perhaps the single most immediate factor in leading to the granting of independence by Britain in 1947, according to Majumdar, was the awareness of the British that they could no longer depend on the loyalty of their Sepoy divisions (Indians serving in the British army) to defend their presence in India. [165]

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[163] Refer to: Majumdar. R.C. *Three Phases of India's Struggle for Freedom*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1961.

[164] Subhas Chandra Bose was another prominent leader of the Indian independence movement. Bose advocated for complete independence for India at the earliest, while Congress wanted to gain independence in phases, in which case after the Lahore Congress convention on 26 January 1930, Congress adopted *Purna Swaraj*, 'complete independence' as its motto. Further reading on Bose can be obtained from: Hiren Mukerjee. *Bow of Burning Gold: a Study of Subhas Chandra Bose*. New Delhi: People's Pub. House, 1977. And, Mihir Bose. *The Lost Hero: a Biography of Subhas Bose.* London: Quartet Books, 1982.

[165] Majumdar, R.C. "Gandhi's Role in the Struggle for Freedom." *Three Phases of India's Struggle for Freedom*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1961. 60-61. In addition, according to Sumit Sarkar, after the 1937 elections in which Congress did extremely well (winning 711 out of 1585 provincial assembly seats), "a steady shift to Right, occasionally veiled by 'Left' rhetoric, increasingly characterized the functioning of the Congress ministries as well as of the party High Command between 1937 and 1939." 351. Sarkar, in quoting imperialist historian Ian Coupland identifies that the totalitarianism of Congress had "completely undermined the federal principle, and, together with a number of pro-Hindu measures of Congress ministries, led to a decisive alienation of the Muslims." 353.

Majumdar also presents arguments to the effect that the Congress Party leaders, including Gandhi, were themselves significantly responsible for the increasing alienation of the Muslim League from the Congress Party, and in this sense contributed to the emergence of the demand for Partition:

> After having cut at the very root of Indian nationalism, by recognizing the Muslims, for all political purposes, as forming a separate nation, once in 1916, and again in 1919, Gandhi and his followers made a complete *volte-face* in 1937. When Jinnah, one of the few real nationalists among the Muslims at one time, suggested a coalition Ministry of the Congress and the Muslim League, the Congress assumed a lofty tone of undiluted Indian nationalism, and refused to entertain any proposal that might have the appearance of representing the Muslims as a separate political unit. The Congress virtually refused to form a coalition ministry with the Muslims unless they liquidated the Muslim League and repudiated all vestiges of their claim to form a separate political entity. Nobody who had any knowledge of the background of Muslim politics could imagine for a moment that the Muslim League would commit political *Hara-kiri* at the bidding of the Congress.[166]

Throughout his discussion, Majumdar sees Gandhi as a remarkable, charismatic leader, whose qualities of "saintliness" (and not satyagraha) were the real source of his mass appeal. But he also regards Gandhi as a very poor and inconsistent politician. He cites evidence from Gandhi's own public statements and writings in the early 1940s to show that that Gandhi himself supported the Congress Party's

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[166] Majumdar, *Three Phases of India's Struggle for Freedom* 51.

refusal to enter into a coalition with the Muslim League, unless the League abolished itself as an organisation. Majumdar writes:

> He maintained that there were only two parties in India, those who supported Congress and those who do not… Gandhi thus slammed the door of negotiations in the face of Jinnah, though he repeatedly tried in vain to open it again.[167]

Conclusion

This chapter has compared and contrasted the representation of the Indian independence movement in the films *Gandhi* and *Sardar*. Although the films take different approaches and cover different aspects of the events, they both climax with achievement of independence and the simultaneous tragedy of the violence surrounding the partition of India and the birth of Pakistan. The similarities and differences between the films raise numerous issues about the representation of history in film, mainly as to the structure of the historical narrative, the differences of cultural and historical perspectives taken by national productions and international co-productions, and the question of how history is selectively used in each case—in the internationally co-produced epic, and in the nationalist epic. Attenborough's *Gandhi* commences with a statement that in effect foregrounds the problem of representing a fifty-five year history in a three-hour film, an issue about which the screenwriters for this film were undoubtedly highly conscious. Nevertheless, the

[167] Majumdar, *Three Phases of India's Struggle for Freedom* 51.

issue of what history is included and what history is excluded in an historical film is a key to the nature of the ideological project of the film, for an historical film (even films as detailed in their representation of the past as the two films discussed in this chapter) is a discourse for and about the present as well as a partial portrait of the historical past.

We can summarise the historical absences in the following way. Firstly both films exclude events that occurred between 1932 and 1942. But this was the period of the growing alienation of the Muslim League from the Congress Party. The core drama at the centre of *Sardar,* and the climax of the film *Gandhi,* is the accelerated division of the Indian sub-continent into two nations, but the reasons for this acceleration, and the reasons for the violence that accompanied partition, are not examined by either film. The reasons for these absences are partly different in the case of each film. *Gandhi* is a film primarily concerned with presenting the evolution and implementation of Gandhi's Satyagraha policy and stratagem. Majumdar argues that in terms of its contribution to the achievement of independence, satyagraha was no longer important after 1932. Nevertheless the film *Gandhi* is tokenistic in its representation of Muslim – Hindu conflicts, showing Gandhi fasting in the latter part of 1947 in order to put an end to them, but in no significant way addressing the earlier history of the issue, including the handling of the issue of the inclusion or exclusion of the Muslim League within the Congress Party by both the party itself and by Gandhi.

The explanation as to the numerous historical absences in *Sardar* is that *Sardar* is not simply a nationalist historical film, but a film biography funded by

groups wishing to commemorate its central protagonist. The biographical aims of the film come into conflict with its aims to tell history as it was. Whatever the nobility and courage of Vallabhbhai Patel throughout his career (as one involved for years in the struggle for independence against the British), he was a prominent member of the Congress Party at the time of the unrealistic demands made by Congress to the Muslim League in 1937, he is reported to have been one of the Congress leaders who lobbied privately for a speeding up of independence, and although he was not a central protagonist in the communalisation of the army, as Minister of Home Affairs he was a central figure in coordinating administrative arrangements, and ultimately the minister responsible for the decision. Although I have made criticisms of Mehta's Sardar and of Attenborough's *Gandhi,* what I have pointed out as limitations in these films are mainly absences and gaps of history, rather than actual crude distortions.

Chapter Three

Questioning the Myth of a Nation: the Formation of Modern Malaysia, Post World War II

Introduction

This chapter examines five significant historical films made in Malaysia in the fifty-four years since the achievement of independence in 1957. The specific focus of the Malaysian historical films discussed are on the nation's efforts to gain independence from the British and on the traumatic period of the Japanese occupation (1941-1945), a period that would change the social structure of the nation. The aftermath of the Japanese occupation would also see the emergence of an anti-British movement led by Chin Peng of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) beginning in 1948, and Malaysian historical films about this period are also discussed.

In contrast to the Indian independence movement in 1945, Malaya's independence from Britain for the indigenous Malays was not so much a struggle but a process of negotiation.[173] With precedents provided by the long struggle in India, particularly at its final stages of negotiations, Malaya's decolonisation would be based on experience gained from the numerous processes of decolonisation going on elsewhere in the recent past. Events in India were also an influential precedent to

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[173] Andaya and Andaya, "Negotiating a New Nation, 1942-69." *A History of Malaysia* 256-300.

other nations within the region, such as the Indonesian independence movement. Indeed, the importance of the Indian independence movement for the ending of British, French and Dutch colonialism mainly around the Asian region is one reason why the historical films in the previously discussed chapter are so significant.

In Malaya, rather than there being a conflict around whether the nation should be unified or divided on sectarian grounds, as occurred in India, a very different set of issues were in play. This had much to do with the different racial groups present within society which at the time generally comprised 46% Malays, 38% Chinese and 16% Indians.[174] Negotiations with the British were not protracted and did not result in conflict. The issue of leadership in Malaya became less important as well, as no single leader emerged of the stature of Gandhi in India or of Sukarno in Indonesia, though negotiations with the British were led by Malaya's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.[175]

This chapter will therefore explore the way in which the multi-racial nature of the new nation is represented in the majority of its historical films. Most, though not all, of the historical films discussed in this chapter were made after 1980 and by that time certain views of the nation had been consolidated and become dominant. Racial conflicts that broke out in the late 1960s had contributed over the next ten years to a strengthening of the hegemonic view of the singular importance of the Malays within this multi-racial nation. This remains a dominant view, even effecting the representation of history. However the second half of this chapter will demonstrate

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[174] Cheah Boon Kheng. "The Social Impact of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1942 – 1945." *Red Star over Malaya*. 3rd Ed. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003. 28.

[175] Cheah Boon Kheng. *The Making of a Nation*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002. 75, 109-111.

that since about 2003, more complex views of the nation and of the contribution of its different races to its history, have at last emerged in Malaysian historical films.

The Malaysian Historical Films Discussed in this Chapter

Historical films in Malaysia have been small in number and sporadically made. Nevertheless, the number of historical films being produced is slowly increasing as the nation demonstrates a need for historical representation. Beginning as early as the 1950s, the Malayan historical films addressed the period of the Japanese occupation and the communist movement in a variety of ways, some depicting periods as far back as the early 1930s through to the 1960s, and one even bringing its attention span through to the present. This fascination with the occupation period lies in the fact that the period is one full of stories, but it is also the starting point of the strengthening of the role of Malay elites, as well as the formation of modern Malaysia as it is today. This chapter thus introduces the Malayan/Malaysian historical films in chronological order.[176] It aims to examine not only the changes in the themes that the films depict, but also the changing ideological perspectives of the films' content as presented by the filmmakers. The chapter argues that while the Malaysian historical films have been dominantly Malay in hegemonic content, contemporary perspectives differ, and efforts to present an alternative perspective on history have emerged.

[176] Reference to the nation state Malaya / Malaysia will be used interchangeably throughout the discussion within this chapter. Malaya refers to the federation of 11 states on the peninsula, prior to the formation of an enlarged federation of Malaysia in 1963 that included the 11 states, Singapore (until 1965), Sarawak and North Borneo (later re-named Sabah). In, Cheah Boon Kheng. "1957-70: "Pluralism" in Nation-Building during the Tunku's Administration." *The Making of a Nation*. 93.

Aside from being dominantly male in its perspective of history, Malaysian historical films after 2003 began to represent the perspective of Malaysian women. The female characters within the more contemporary historical films reveal a position of being more than mother or daughter, but part of the social and historical changes taking place. The role of women in one of the new historical films discussed is parallel in importance to that of the male protagonist, as perspectives from both sides (male and female characters) emerge. While the Malaysian historical films initially begin by identifying with the position of the hegemonic Malays, a transition eventually occurs. In addition, elements of Malaysian history that were once overlooked (as to the position of other races in history) are re-evaluated which leads to the questioning of various aspects of Malaysian history. As a result, present Malaysian historical films openly question the ideas of the formation of the Malaysian state that are based on older histories told.

The first Malayan historical film which deals with modern history is a minor nationalist epic entitled, *Sarjan Hassan* (1958). The film was made a year after Malaya gained independence in 1957, and it is about a fictional Malay soldier in World War II.[177] Another Malay/Malaysian historical film would later be produced, some twenty-three years later, entitled *Bukit Kepong* (Jins Shamsuddin, 1981). This film depicts the siege on a Malay police station by communist guerrillas in 1950 during the Emergency period. The film highlights the bravery of the Malay soldiers in defending the Bukit Kepong police station against a guerrilla brigade of the

[177] Two historical films were produced in 1958 one was *Sarjan Hassan* and the other, *Matahari* (Ramon Estella, 1958). The film *Matahari* was set in the Japanese period about a group of villagers who opposed the presence of the Japanese, and contains a multi-racial cast. However, the film was not accessible at the time of drafting this research. Refer to: Amir Muhammad. *120 Malay Movies*. Petaling Jaya: Matahari Books, 2010.

Communist Party of Malaya, most of whom were Chinese. It would be nineteen years after *Bukit Kepong* before another historical film depicting a similar story to *Sarjan Hassan* is made. The film *Leftenan Adnan* (Aziz M. Osman, 2000) is a loose biographical film about Adnan, the first Malay soldier to be decorated by King George VI. However, within the past ten years there have been a number of highly innovative Malaysian historical films that show history from a different perspective, notably *Paloh* (Adman Salleh, 2003). It is a film that commences with the surrender of the Japanese, but using a flashback structure, explores aspects of the years prior to 1945. Finally, an innovative film by independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad, *The Last Communist* ('Lelaki Komunis Terakhir,' 2006), an experimental essay film, not only takes into account the historical perspective of the 'other', but cross-references its historical material with points of view of people living in contemporary Malaysian society.

Three of these Malaysian historical films were produced or funded by the current ruling government, though not the films of Amir Muhammad. The three films received funding from the Malaysian government either via the army or police force, or from government bodies such as, FINAS (abr. National Film Development Corporation Malaysia) and *Filem Negara Malaysia* ('National Film of Malaysia'). One aim of FINAS and *Filem Negara Malaysia* in producing Malaysian historical films was to visualise national history as a means of embedding a sense of nationalism within contemporary Malaysian society. However, within the last ten years there has been a shift in the perspective of the histories told. Malaysian filmmakers such as Adman Salleh and Amir Muhammad have moved away from films that portray acts of Malay bravery and patriotism, to films that attempt to

balance notions of popular memory, to films that directly question the historical foundations of the nation. While most historical films work within a limited budget of around RM 3.4 million (equivalent to USD$1 million) per film, the Malaysian films themselves are very much localised in terms of content and appeal. The films often use the Malay national language, as opposed to Mandarin and Tamil, and feature popular Malay-Malaysian actors or artists. Nevertheless, younger generation filmmakers such Amir Muhammad have found new ways of retelling history in a different form, one that differs from the traditional, more commercially released historical films practiced in Malaysia in the past.

Malayan/Malaysian History and Ideas of the Nation

The formation of modern Malaysia is generally seen to have been influenced by a number of critical events – the Japanese occupation (1941), the rejection of the Malayan Union (1946), the formation of the Federation of Malaya (1948), the Emergency (1948-1960), Independence (1957), the formation of Malaysia (1963), and the ethnic riots of 1969 – all of which contributed to the 'making of Malaysia'.[178] The Malayan/Malaysian historical films analysed in this thesis mainly focus on the conflict that precipitated decolonisation in Malaya, specifically depicting the Japanese war in the Pacific, the period of the Japanese occupation and the Emergency period. While films about Malay heroism in World War II have been the initial form taken by the Malaysian historical films, this is a limited view of history, for the reason that, historically, it was the Chinese within Malayan society who

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[178] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* 256.

undertook much of the resistance towards the Japanese. This resistance towards the Japanese was because the Chinese were aware of the excesses perpetrated by the Japanese in their invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and their subsequent invasion of China in 1937. The Japanese forces were hostile to the Chinese in Malaya due to the resistance put up against them by the Chinese in China. This hostile relationship between the two resulted in the perpetration of a terrible massacre of known anti-Japanese Chinese civilians in Singapore shortly after the Japanese captured the island in mid-February 1942. A number of Malaysian historical films discussed in this chapter, however, fail to address the role of the Chinese within the nation's history, and this omission within popular culture has only strengthened the views of the Malay elites about the nation's history.

As suggested by Benedict Anderson, nations as communities are developed in increasingly literate societies, and with literacy, people begin to imagine their societies in immediate ways in terms of sets of mutual concerns. However, the applicability of Anderson's definition has been questioned by Khoo Gaik Cheng in its application to the Malaysian state. Khoo argues that the problems faced by Malaysia subsequent to the racial riots of 1969, mean that racial and ethnic specificity are factors fundamental to ideas held about the nation in Malaysia and cannot be dispensed with in any analysis of the nation as a formation.[179] Thus, for the purpose of discussion within this chapter, it is relevant to quote from a lecture on the idea of the nation delivered by French social theorist Ernest Renan in 1882. It was delivered at a time when concepts of the nation, based on models provided by the European nation states (many at that time undergoing a process of national

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[179] Khoo Gaik Cheng. "Reclaiming Adat." *Reclaiming Adat*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006. 12.

consolidation, for example Germany) were increasingly influential internationally. Renan wrote:

> A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.[180]

Renan's assertion that *a nation is a soul* expresses the idea that a nation as an entity has some relation to the experiences of its people. As Renan describes it, the nation is not a physical entity but is based on shared memories of both the past and the present. The nation, as Renan explains, is built on years of struggle and sacrifice, and is based on a heroic past. For Renan it is great men and glory that provides the crucial components for a society's historical capital, and so forms a national idea.[181]

Renan's ideas about what constitutes the nation presented here are still operative today in most countries, including Australia. In Australia, for example, exploits and sacrifices made by Australian servicemen, but particularly in World War I and at Gallipoli, are seen by politicians, historians and educators as part of a shared heritage that consolidates and gives a rationale to the nation of Australia. Similarly, as part of the nation's historical legacy, Malaysia too possesses a shared experience of enduring Japanese occupation and the communist movement prior to its

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[180] Renan, Ernest. "What is a Nation ?" *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 19. Ernest Renan (1823-1892) was an important nineteenth century French theorist who wrote about a variety of topics. His famous essay, *What is a Nation?* was first delivered as a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882 and continues to be an important point of reference for scholars.

[181] Renan, *Nation and Narration* 19.

independence. To some extent, the nation assumes and accepts the past without question and renders it 'national'. But for a nation such as Malaysia to remain as it was, to retain the same view of itself, even after the end of colonial rule, would seem inappropriate.

As a nation emerging from colonial rule, Malaysia seeks to distinguish itself from its past by developing its own distinctive traits of history. In creating its own national characteristics, the nation follows the lead of its previously colonising nation state. This results in the nation imposing upon itself the notion of a unified culture that leads to the formation and consolidation of a particular view of its own national essence, with particular sets of views of the nation's historical past. Disputing this idea of the unity of national cultures, Stuart Hall argues that national cultures "are constructed identities that produce meanings about the nation that we can identify with, and these are contained in the stories and memories that are told about them as they create images that connect the present with the past."[182] Anderson makes a similar point, suggesting that national cultures invent nations where they do not exist.[183] However, as I have suggested, Anderson's account of nationalism is limited by its failure to include considerations of race as a factor (this criticism initially made by Khoo). Indeed Anderson's emphasis on the nation being the result of acts of imagination ("it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign") draws attention to the creation of a community in itself, a single unified community, where all members are able to imagine together.[184]

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[182] Hall, *Modernity and its Futures* 292-295.

[183] Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 6.

[184] Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 6.

Moreover, these acts of the imagination are not only an activity of the founders of a nation, but are also found in on-going acts of historical representation or in narratives that refer to or retell events seen as fundamental to the nation's sense of itself, whether in poetry, novels, drama or in films and television.

A nation's historical narrative nevertheless is much controlled, as suggested by philosopher Louis Althusser, who sees specific predominating national narratives as almost always an ideology of the dominant class. For Althusser, social control is expressed in the representations and images that are intended to convey society's prevailing view of reality and the foundation 'myths' its people live by. While historians, cultural theorists and philosophers (such as Hall, Anderson, Hobsbawm and Ranger, and Althusser) draw attention to the way in which traditions and histories are constructed, often based on ideologies of the dominant class, their point is that these constructed or reconstructed traditions and histories are frequently the very means by which national essences are formed. As a result of these theoretical frameworks, in this chapter I examine the tendency in Malaysian cinema to construct particular views of history, as given and natural, so as to create an unproblematic and unquestioning view of Malaysian history. Alternatively, I will also examine ways in which this tendency to construct a particular view of history has been interrogated in recent years not only in some recent independent documentaries, but even in one notable feature film.

The Origin of Malay Nationalism and its Changing Politics

The history of colonialism in Malaya can be briefly summarised into three periods of more than four hundred years of foreign rule. It begins with the arrival of the Portuguese (1511 – 1614), followed by two hundred years under the Dutch (1614 – 1824), and finally, the British came to dominate the Malay Peninsula (1824 – 1957), with independence being granted in 1957. However, the years prior to European dominance of Malaya saw the thriving international port of Malacca become an entry point for traders and immigrants of mostly Chinese and Indian descent. The presence of the Chinese and Indians in Malaya, however, intensified under British rule. The British saw advantages in developing particular sectors of the economy using particular racial groups: the Chinese in trade and mining, Indians in the developing and expanding rubber industry and the Malays in village agriculture. Hence, Malaysia today forms a diversified but sectorised multi-racial nation, which is dominated politically by the homogenising Malays. Prior to World War II, nevertheless, Malaya was a country that was harmonious and without conflict as:

> Malaya's plural society remained a fairly harmonious one until the outbreak of the Second World War. By keeping the three races isolated within distinct communities, allowing them to mingle only in the market place, British policy reduced the room for social conflict and social change. This policy required a delicate balancing and certainly could not have continued indefinitely without producing marked interracial tensions.[185]

[185] Cheah, "Malaya's Plural Society in 1941." *Red Star Over Malaya* 16. In contrast, Joel S. Kahn has argued that however much the British wished to keep the races apart, there is plenty of evidence of different racial communities living adjacent to one another during the colonial period, and of some

The Japanese occupation of Malaya permanently affected the future of Malayan inter-ethnic relations.[186] The harmonious peace between the races changed after Japan gained control of Malaya in February 1942. In administering Malaya, the Japanese depended on pre-war British administrative policies which resulted in many Malay public servants and officers retained to assist the Japanese. While the Japanese continued the pro-Malay policy set up by the British, they regarded the Chinese with intense suspicion.[187] More often than not, the Chinese were subject to severely harsh treatment as the Malayan Chinese had been loyal to the anti-Japanese movement in mainland China. In comparison to the Chinese, the Indians were not as brutalized, though they were forced to work on the Death Railway in Siam. The Indians were awarded milder treatment as the anti-colonial movements in India itself was used by the Japanese to gain Malayan Indian cooperation.[188]

The movement towards decolonisation after World War II strengthened the resolve of the indigenous Malays to control the direction of the emerging nation. In attempts to defend the nation against foreign non-Malay influences, the indigenous Malays began to 'isolate' the other races. As these non-Malay influences included the Malayan Chinese and Indian communities, conflicts began to arise between the groups, as assimilation within the community had yet to be fully achieved. The sense of Malay patriotism was also further influenced by nationalist movements in India and Indonesia during the 1940s, resulting in the formation of a Malay hegemonic ideology linked to the notion of '*ketuanan Melayu'* or Malay sovereignty, as well as

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interaction between them. See Joel S. Kahn. *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006. 57.

[186] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* 256, 258.

[187] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* 260.

[188] Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* 260.

to the formation of a number of Malay political parties based on the ideals of *agama, bangsa dan Negara* ('religion, race and nation'), which remain today as the nation's governing ideology.[189] While the Malays saw themselves as the primary racial group in the newly emerging Malaysian state, they increasingly saw themselves as economically disadvantaged. Racial tensions culminated in the racial riots of 1969. At the time of these riots, which involved Malay attacks on the Chinese, especially in the city of Kuala Lumpur, the proportion of Malay ownership of national corporate assets was only 2%.[190]

The first two films discussed are films made to celebrate the ideals of Malay-Malaysian nationalism; they are dominated by the characteristic of lifting the Malay image. The central aim of these films, which were made respectively in 1958 and 2000, represents the main protagonist as an agent of Malayness, demonstrating virtuous traits of bravery and honour in service of the nation. These portraits of the Malays during the years the films were produced are much in accord with the long standing dominant ideologies of Malaysia. But in 1998, Malaysia would experience one of its most influential political changes in recent history, with the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, and since then, "political awareness has risen and manifested itself in various suggestions, prescriptions and activities."[191] Anwar's sudden arrest under the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), his beatings in prison, and the general heavy-handed treatment he received from his "mentor"

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[189] Shamsul A.B. "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: the Idea and Practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered." *Contesting Malayness – Malay Identity Across Boundaries*. Ed. by Timothy P. Barnard. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004. 137.

[190] Leifer, Michael. *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of South-East Asia.* New York: Routledge, 1995. 162.

[191] Derich, Claudia. "A Step Forward: Malaysian Ideas for Political Change." *Journal of Asian and African Studies.* 2002(37). 43.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed, mobilised Malaysians around issues of injustice and reform, especially university students, writers and intellectuals. The ferment at this time can be seen to have led to new ways of representing the society, and even to the eventual scripting and production of new kinds of historical films, seen particularly in Adman Salleh's *Paloh*, and in the documentary films of Amir Muhammad.[192]

Malay National Heroes in *Sarjan Hassan* (1958) and *Leftenan Adnan* (2000)

The following discussion of the historical films *Sarjan Hassan* and *Leftenan Adnan* address notions of the Malays as national heroes within the nation's popular history. In analysing the position of the Malays, the discussion aims to highlight the singular historical perspective of the nation's history as told by these indigenous Malays. The two films discussed are set in the period leading up to the arrival of the Japanese in Malaya, and show the actions of the protagonists during this period.

The film *Sarjan Hassan* was produced in 1958, a year after Malayan independence, by the Singapore-based, Chinese-owned Shaw Brothers, under the banner of Malay Film Productions. Initially directed by Filipino director Lamberto V. Avellana, the film was later completed by its star, P.Ramlee, who had begun directing films in 1955.[193] Because the film style and narrative approach of the 1950s Malay studio era were, apart from the comedies, generally melodramatic in theme and style, *Sarjan Hassan* is based on the themes of the heroic underdog, family and

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[192] Khoo, "Malay Myth and Changing Attitudes towards Nationalism: the Hang Tuah / Hang Jebat Debate." *Reclaiming Adat* 24.

[193] While Avellana initially directed *Sarjan Hassan*, the film was later completed by P. Ramlee, who was not only the film's screenwriter but also its main protagonist.

love. The use of musical devices such as song sequences, an influence of the very popular Indian cinema of the time, was common in these productions. Predominantly Malay in terms of cultural reference, the film *Sarjan Hassan* addresses ideas of Malayness and Malay nationalism, and presents elements of a national identity in the character of the film's protagonist, Hassan. Acts of Malay bravery and patriotism are woven into the narrative background of the film, becoming stronger towards the end. These changes in the film's approach are possibly due to the change in the film's directors, as the Malay, P. Ramlee, replaced the film's Filipino director.

Sarjan Hassan uses a linear narrative and presents ideas of love (for father, girl, and race) in numerous conflicts that successfully dramatises Hassan as the underdog who rises out of his misfortunes. The film can be divided into three phases of Hassan's life. Phase one introduces Hassan as a young boy of ten years old, who is orphaned and who is then adopted by his late father's kind-hearted employer. It establishes Hassan as an outsider, as he attempts to fit into a new life with his foster family, which includes an older, jealous stepbrother, Aziz. The film shifts to the second phase of the film when a young adult Hassan decides to enlist in the first *Regimen Askar Melayu* ('Malay Regiment'), in the years before the Japanese invasion of Malaya. The film shows Hassan undergoing military training and growing into a competent leader. It is only in the third phase, towards the end of the film, when Hassan goes to war against the Japanese, that his bravery as a Malay soldier is brought to the fore. The film shows Hassan saving his family, the girl of his dreams and the villagers from the abusive Japanese. It also shows him linking up with British forces in Malaya towards the end of the war. The film concludes with Hassan finally being accepted by his family and, above all else, by Aziz.

One element to note about this film is the absence of other races in its portrait of Malaya in the 1930s. But this was not an exceptional feature of the film, as a vast majority of the films produced by the Chinese owned Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions, were not only in the Malay language and about Malay communities, but rarely featured characters from other races. Even if the films did feature characters from other races, these characters only had a minor role in the story. As Khoo explains, "in Malay cinema, if and when non-Malay actors are featured, they are mostly caricatures or stereotypes, with Indians appearing as comic figures or thugs, Chinese being mercenary shopkeepers or landlords, and Caucasian women behaving promiscuously."[194] Nevertheless, despite giving the impression that the Malay nation consisted almost entirely of Malays, the Malay language films, particularly those starring P. Ramlee, were extremely popular with audiences, including large numbers of Chinese and Indians.[195] The decision to feature Malays as the only major characters was a studio decision, taken by the Chinese producers rather than by their employees. While the creative teams were composed of Malays and Indians, financial profit/gain was a major concern, as earlier interracial films produced by the studios had failed at the box office.

Anthropologist Joel S. Kahn initially presents P. Ramlee as an example of a popular Malay artist. Kahn believes that P. Ramlee's vision of a Malay nation, based on the values of Malay villagers or a *kampung nation* reveals "a form of mediation between the nationalist narratives of Malay intellectuals and the experience of a

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[194] Khoo, "Cinema of Denial." *Reclaiming Adat* 103.

[195] Rohani Hashim. "Introduction." *Malay Comedy in a Late Colonial and Post-colonial Context: the Singapore Comedy Films of P. Ramlee, 1957-1964*. PhD Thesis. Clayton: Monash University, 2007. 23.

broader Malay public."[196] Kahn de-emphasizes P. Ramlee's role as a gifted artist and sees his films as constructed in response to popular taste at the time, and as "a construction of the producers and consumers of popular entertainment in 1950s British Malaya."[197] Initially, for Kahn, P. Ramlee's films were valuable for the way they provided insights into 'the popular consumption of Malay nationalism'. However, in Kahn's analysis of a scene from P. Ramlee's directorial debut, *Penarik Beca* (1955) Kahn suggests that there is the presence of hybrid elements from numerous cultures. He concludes that *Penarik Beca* and "indeed most of the rest of the Ramlee oeuvre, also provides an implicit model for the ordering of interracial relations in soon to be independent Malaya."[198]

With regards to *Sarjan Hassan*, while the main protagonist, Hassan, becomes a hero later in the film, the fact that he is an orphan and not fully accepted by the society operates as a metaphor. It is a metaphor of the years when the Malay race was not fully accepted (in the 1930s and after) by the British. Moreover they were financially disadvantaged within British Malaya. In the film, Hassan's origins begin in a Malay village with the support of his guardian. Ramlee, a talented and charismatic actor and singer, and, in his mature period, a skilled and inventive writer and director, portrays a character who needs to strive against various disadvantages, yet later succeeds. In contrast, other Malays in the film are not presented in so disadvantaged a position as is Hassan in the early years of his life.

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[196] Kahn, *Other Malays* 130.

[197] Kahn, *Other Malays* 130.

[198] Kahn, *Other Malays* 164.

The film uses history as a background rather than depicting actual known historical events. Set in the 1930s with events climaxing with the arrival and later the surrender of the Japanese, there is minimal co-relation with exact history. There are, however, even more glaring inconsistencies than this. With Hassan as the film's historical agent, the film is structurally linear, however, the time line of the historical depiction within the film is disoriented. The initial transitions within the film, between Hassan's youth and adulthood, is carefully marked and executed with the use of two transitioning devices - ripples of water in an urn and a song. However, the historical time line between the Japanese takeover of Malaya that began at the end of 1941 and ended with the end of the war, on 15 August 1945, is presented in an abrupt and disjointed manner.

The actual period of Japanese Occupation was for the duration of three years and eight months. The film, however, seemingly represents that length of time over a matter of weeks.[199] This abrupt transition causes the historical presentation of unfolding events of the period to take on a hasty and illogical flow. Had the film's director or editor inserted even a transition device such as a dissolve, it would have rectified the confused presentation of historical time that occurs at this point in the film. In addition, according to veteran Malaysian film director Jamil Sulong, when Avellana's *Sarjan Hassan* failed to meet the standards of his earlier films made in the Philippines, the studio management decided that a number of scenes were not

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[199] The Japanese occupied Malaya from 8 December 1941 until 15 August 1945, a period of three years and eight months. In which case, the British in Singapore surrendered to the Japanese on 15 February 1942.

done according to studio production standards.[200] The studio had P.Ramlee compose songs and add musical scenes to the film. Moreover, it can also be said that historical accuracy was not a priority with the Shaw Brothers, only aesthetics, as they ran the studios as an industrial project and no film was fully within the director's control.

The manner in which this period of history is told in the film also influenced the representation of the British and their presence in Malaya during this period. Historically, just before the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, a small group of British led stay-behind-parties were already in place. It has often been perceived that Malaya was left to fend for itself during the Occupation. This resulted in the Malays feeling as if they had been abandoned by the British. However, prior to the fall of Singapore, the British had actually hastily set up a Special Training School (STS) in Singapore to train parties that would stay behind in occupied Malaya. These parties were comprised of Malays, Chinese and Indians, as well as a small number of expatriate Europeans and English police officers. However, the survival of British intelligence in Malaya would later fall on the (so called) 'gallant single-handed stay behind mission' led by Frederick Spencer Chapman. Chapman retells his efforts as he tracked Japanese movements and made contact with members of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), who would later form the main resistance against the Japanese throughout their occupation.[201]

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[200] Jamil Sulong. "The Studio Era." *The Malay Cinema*. In Hatta Azad Khan. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Publication, 1997. 85.

[201] Trenowden, I. "Singapore, Ceylon, and the Andamans Interlude." *Malayan Operations Most Secret – Force 136*. Singapore: Heinemann Educational, 1983. 58. Further detailed accounts of Chapman's Malayan experience during Japanese Occupation are in his memoirs entitled, *The Jungle is Neutral* (1949).

Contrary to these events in history, *Sarjan Hassan* shows Hassan joining forces with British intelligence to fight the Japanese. No other races are identified, and while it was true that there were British stay-behind parties set up during Japanese occupation, they were not the only resistance to Japanese rule. The role of the Chinese and the established CPM, who were actively involved in the fight against the Japanese, is absent from the film. The film chooses to historically ally itself with the British rather than the CPM. This demonstrates a conscious effort, by the filmmakers or the producers, to show a continuing degree of respect for the British even in their defeat by the Japanese. The total absence of any Chinese representation in the film is not simply to prioritise the British, whose role during the Occupation was small, but to draw attention away from the main force opposing the Japanese during the occupation period, specifically the guerrilla forces of the Communist Party of Malaya which was made up mainly, though not entirely, of ethnic Chinese. They not only opposed the Japanese, but subsequently opposed the continuing presence of the British colonisers, resulting in the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960.

At the time *Sarjan Hassan* was made, the Malayan Emergency was still in progress, and the Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, had refused to accept the CPM as a political party that could be part of the political process in Malaya and Singapore.[202] Just as Tunku Abdul Rahman rejected the role of the CPM, the film also rejects them in accordance with Malay hegemonic governance and an allegiance to the British. It can therefore be suggested that *Sarjan Hassan* is a

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[202] Malaya's war against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), known as the Malayan Emergency was from 1948 until 1960.

nationalist film that is rooted in the ideas of the hegemonic Malays as the primary race in the newly independent state.

– *Leftenan Adnan* (2000)

Another film working along a similar ideological mode is Aziz M. Osman's loose biopic *Leftenan Adnan* (2000).[203] *Leftenan Adnan* depicts the life of an heroic Malay soldier who rose through the ranks of the British military in colonial Malaya during the 1930s, Lieutenant Adnan Saidi. In 1937 Adnan was chosen to represent his platoon at the inauguration of King George VI in London where, during his stay in London, he was given an award by the King. This made Adnan the first Malay officer to be decorated by the British. Adnan lost his life on 14 February 1942, while leading his battalion in a battle at Bukit Chandu (also known as 'the Battle for Opium Hill') in the last stage of the defence of Singapore against Japanese invasion.[204] The film was a co-production of the Ministry of Defence (Malaysia), the Royal Malaysian Armed Forces, Grand Brilliance Sdn.Bhd., a leading private production company, as well as Aziz M. Osman's own Paradigm Films. *Leftenan Adnan* suggests a close resemblance to the story of *Sarjan Hassan* in terms of its linear narrative, the role of the protagonist and the thematic threads that reflect themes of

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[203] *Leftenan Adnan*. Dir. Aziz M. Osman. Perf. Hairie Othman, Umie Aida and Faizal Hussein. Ministry of Defence Malaysia, Royal Malaysian Armed Forces, Grand Brilliance Sdn. Bhd. And Paradigm Film, 2000.

[204] Liza Sahid. "Biography - Lt. Adnan Saidi (1915 – 1942) Infantry Officer, War Hero." Knowledgenet, *The Singapore Social History Source*, 1999. Retrieved from *The Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, 17 Feb 2007. 6 February 2009. <http://habitatnews.nus.edu.sg/heritage/pasirpanjang/articles/adnan_saidi_infantry_officer_war_hero-liza_sahid1999.html> See also Nureza Ahmad & Nor-Afidah Abd Rahman. "Lieutenant Adnan Saidi." *Infopedia Talk*. National Library Board Singapore, 11 June 2004. 6 February 2009. <http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_456_2005-01-18.html>

Malay bravery, family and love. However, the difference between the two films is that where Adnan's story ends with his death prior to the downfall of Singapore in 1942, the fictional Hassan survives to oppose the Japanese throughout the Occupation until their surrender in 1945.

Leftenan Adnan clearly would have satisfied its major funding body, for it not only valorises an early hero of the Malay Armed Forces, but presents a conservative view of Malay history in the 1930s. Yet, in some ways, the film also presents a more complex view of Malay history than previously presented. The film depicts many cultural traditions such as the ritual of group *berkatan* or circumcision, and village gatherings of *kenduri* (feasting), a lifestyle of early pre-independent Malaya. The film also uses numerous archival photos from the early years of the Malay Regiment (which the British finally agreed to set up in 1932, after many years of lobbying by the Malay sultans), and provides a brief survey of the changing social ideologies of the 1930s, influenced not only by the impending war but also by political independence struggles both in India and Indonesia.

However, the film *Leftenan Adnan* depicts the more complex history of the period by showing two divergent strands within Malay nationalism at the time. The first is based on Adnan's personal characteristics as a dedicated and inspired young man who believed in defending Malaya against foreign invaders, mainly the Japanese. The second strand is with the birth of *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (United Malay Youths – KMM), the first Malay nationalist political organisation in Malaya, set up in 1938. The film briefly highlights the role of KMM leader, Ibrahim Yaakob, as he pursues the unification of the Malays and initiates early Malay nationalist

movements among Malay youths prior to Japanese occupation. Ibrahim's idealism at this point in time led to a radicalisation of Malay politics, as simultaneously, Ibrahim also formed a working partnership with the Japanese by providing them with strategic geographical information about Malaya and the location of British forces, in return for a promise of support for Malayan independence. Noble in his goals, Ibrahim Yaakob and KMM failed to unite the Malays or gain independence via the Japanese. With the return of the British in 1945, Ibrahim fled to Indonesia to escape British prosecution.

Contrary to *Sarjan Hassan*, that depicts the role of the British as comrades in arms, Adnan views the British as a means to a bigger goal. Adnan's ideological philosophy is that the Malays need to fight to defend the nation against its enemies. He also believes that the Malays should 'use' whoever can lead them to the ultimate goal of independence. Even from a young age, the character Adnan is portrayed as a boy who upholds Malay values of *agama, bangsa dan negara* (religion, race and country). And while Malay ideals are being highlighted by the film, negative perceptions of the British towards the Malays are also shown, such as in the scene where a British plantation owner ridicules both Adnan's position as a Malay solider in the British Army, and his decoration by the British king.[205]

More detail from the political and social history of the period is also provided in *Leftenan Adnan* in that it briefly shows a scene of the first contact between Spencer Chapman, the British officer laying the ground for stay-behind forces, and

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[205] Syed Hussein Alatas. *The Myth of the Lazy Native: a Study of the Image of the Malays, Fillipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*, London: F.Cass. 1977. – Malaysian academician and sociologist, Syed Hussein Alatas, address this 'denigrating' view of the natives by European colonisers in the book as he criticises these 'untruths' of European perspectives.

members of the CPM. In this meeting, members of the CPM negotiate for supplies and ammunition from the British as payment for their fight against the Japanese. However, apart from this scene, *Leftenan Adnan* too avoids acknowledging any further role the CPM played in advancing the cause of independence from Britain, nor does it highlight the presence of other racial groups during the period of the Japanese occupation in Malaya.

The film's decision to prioritise the position of the Malays and ignore other racial groups closely reflects how national ideology is generated by the dominant political class within society. It is the Malays who are identified as being the defenders of Malaya, whereas roles played by other races are not identified. The perception of history as told from the point of view of the film creates a myth that society lives by, as any shortcomings of the dominant group are also excluded. The next film to be discussed, *Bukit Kepong*, further illustrates the heroic actions of the dominant Malays. However, the film places the 'other' (namely the Chinese) in a stereotyped role as antagonists within the film.

The Malayan Emergency (1948-1960): *Bukit Kepong* (1981)

With the surrender of the Japanese in 1945, the Communist Party of Malaya began to assert its demand for an independent Malaya. Not only had the CPM resisted the Japanese for the entire period of the occupation, they had also played an important role in assisting with the British return to the Malay Peninsula, and in the disarming of the Japanese. Indeed Chin Peng, the leader of the CPM, was awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) by the British Crown. But the CPM was anxious

to ensure that the liberation of Malaya did not lead to a lasting re-occupation by the British. CPM's intent was clear, they wanted the nation to be free of colonisers and ensure that the British grant Malaya its independence. When little action was taken by the British to pave the way for self-governance, the CPM took it upon themselves to free Malaya. The British-Malayan administration declared war on the CPM in 1948, after the death of three plantation workers in Sungai Siput, Perak, killed by communist insurgents. Guerrilla action would continue sporadically for the next twelve years.

The film *Bukit Kepong* addresses the presence of the CPM within Malaysian military history. Like the other films discussed so far, *Bukit Kepong* (Jins Shamsuddin, 1981) continues to assert the position of the hegemonic Malays. In the film, the Malays are presented as heroes, while the communists are considered as threats/enemies. The film received considerable government support, including significant assistance from the Royal Malaysian Police Force.[206] It was produced to commemorate the bravery and sacrifice of fallen Malay heroes during the Emergency period from 1948 to 1960. It was a period when the newly emergent nation was seen as threatened by guerrilla forces of the CPM.

Bukit Kepong tells the story of a pre-dawn attack on the Bukit Kepong police station located in the southern state of Johor on 23 February 1950.[207] The film mainly depicts the battle that saw thirty-seven people defend themselves against a force of

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[206] Police officers from the Royal Malaysian Police not only were script and set consultants for the film, but a number of officers also acted as numerous characters within the film, to the extent that Chinese police officers also played the characters of the Chinese communists of the CPM.

[207] Mohd Yusoff Ariffin. "Peristiwa Bukit Kepong." *Darurat 1948 – 1960*. Eds. Khoo Kay Kim and Adnan Hj Nawang. Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya and Muzium Angkatan Tentera, 1984. 93 – 124.

two hundred communist guerrillas.[208] By morning, only four badly wounded police officers and ten civilians, mainly women and children, survived. In contrast to the earlier two films, that had leading protagonists, *Bukit Kepong* has no central characters. The film is largely an action film and provides only the most minimal political context as to motives and events, as the film focuses on a battle raging through the night between two sides. The film nonetheless, is a kind of literalisation of oppositions at a number of levels. The communists, presented as a mass organisation, made up largely of Chinese, with little individualisation of character, are presented as unequivocally bad and cruel. The Malays, on the other hand, represented in the role of the policemen, among whom one can identify a few leaders who show initiative, are represented as unequivocally good. The film simply heightens these oppositions as the destructive communists are shown bombing buses and bridges, and attacking defenceless villagers.

Bukit Kepong certainly deals with a period when the conflict with the communists was at its most intense. Australian as well as British forces were deployed to counter the communist threat. For some years there were murderous attacks on villagers regarded as supporting the British Malay hegemony. 1951 saw the assassination of a British High Commissioner on a road north of Kuala Lumpur. At a conference in 1955 the Malayan Chief Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, met with Chin Peng, the leader of the communists, and an amnesty was offered for all insurgents. However, the British-Malayan administration refused to allow the communists to operate as a political party in the new nation, and the communists

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[208] A total number of 37 people were accounted for at the Bukit Kepong Police Station on 23 February 1950. They included 23 Malay police officers, 7 of their wives and 7 children.

returned to continue their jungle campaign for another five years. *Bukit Kepong* mentions nothing of the role of the communists in opposing the Japanese, nor of their initiative in continuing to press for independence from Britain. In *Bukit Kepong*, generally, the political context is ignored. There is nevertheless, a suggestion within the film that the struggle to defend the police station was conducted without reinforcements being supplied by the British administration, due to the fact that British interests, such plantation and tin mines, were not threatened. The film was made in a very simplistic way, reiterating a situation where there was firing on both sides around the police station between the two groups for a whole night. Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings the film is considered an essential text in the history of Malaysian patriotism, and has even been adapted as a literary text and used within the national school curriculum.

Changing Paradigms: An Alternate Perspective in *Paloh* (2003)

In an attempt to address elements of popular memory, with regards to what the public knows, and to contrast it to specific formal and documented history, consideration must be given to the subjective nature of what is 'known' history. Popular memory within the context of this chapter refers to shared historical knowledge possessed by the mass public in contrast to subjective history as told from the perspective of individuals. Ernest Renan has argued that the 'essence' of a nation depends not only upon its citizens having many things in common, but that they also need to have forgotten many things. Renan explains 'forgetting' as follows:

> Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial.[209]

With regard to the relevance of Renan's notion of forgetting to the Malaysian context, I would suggest that the term refers to elements of the nation's history which are either 'ignored' or 'unacknowledged'. What is commonly forgotten or ignored in Malaysian history is the role of the Chinese and the CPM in the Pacific War.

Marcia Landy, on the other hand, in reflecting not so much on historical films, but on what the genre can offer to an audience, affirms that:

> Historical narratives offer individuals and groups a way to assimilate dominant conceptions of the world and, perhaps, to consent to them; more importantly, what is offered is the opportunity to express an awareness of their conceptual limitations.[210]

Landy argues that the audience should be given the opportunity not only to accept or disagree with a given historical narrative, but to engage with its whole conceptualisation of the history it represents. I would suggest that this is what occurs in the film *Paloh,* as it provides a historical narrative where the audience has the

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[209] Renan, *Nation and Narration* 11.

[210] Landy, Marcia. "Looking Backward: Versions of History and Common Sense in Recent British Cinema." *Film, Politics, and Gramsci*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. 123.

opportunity to judge the conceptualisation of Malay historical events that occurred at the time of the end of the Japanese occupation, based on what they know, perhaps, but also based on what the film may show them for the first time. The history that is represented within the film can be accepted, or rejected, within the audience's terms. But it may confront the audience with new experiences which force them to accept a different and wider conceptual framework for understanding the history of their own society. Moreover, as Landy explains:

> Recollection of past events serves, as in popular notions of psychoanalysis, to reconstruct events in the present by means of uncovering repressed material, bringing what has been hidden to light, and recovering loss.[211]

With regards to the Malaysian historical film, some groups have over the years become concerned with the 'bias' of the hegemonic Malays in disregarding a fundamental part of the nation's history, the contribution of the Chinese communists in fighting against the Japanese during the Japanese occupation, and also against British colonialism. While the earlier films *Sarjan Hassan* and *Leftenan Adnan* excluded history regarding other races in Malaya because these films simply reflected the bias of the hegemonic groups, these excluded histories are unveiled in *Paloh*.

The film *Paloh* presents a similarly localised setting to *Bukit Kepong.* The film is set in the small town of Paloh, also in the southern state of Johor. Through the use of flashbacks, *Paloh* allows for a meandering narrative to develop. This method facilitates the depiction of the circulating relationships between the characters and

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[211] Landy, *Film, Politics, and Gramsci* 124.

their counterparts in other racial groups. The film draws attention to longer term conflicts and social dilemmas of Malayan society of the time by using as its starting point events that occurred in August and September 1945 at the time of the transition from Japanese rule, the return of British colonialism and the beginnings of the communist insurgency against the British.

In contrast to *Bukit Kepong*, where the protagonists were collectively members of institutional groups – the Malay police force and the Communist Party of Malaya – *Paloh* focuses on the individual in a group context. It draws attention to the issue of subjectivity during a complicated time in Malaysian history. As previously mentioned, the hegemonic control over national history by the ruling government in Malaysia has restricted the society's overall comprehension of the nation's history. This has limited the nation's historical knowledge by creating a selective popular memory. Nevertheless, as Malaysians become more sophisticated, a desire to show and understand the unfolding events of history in more complete ways has paved way for films that address the multiracial nature of the society, using more challenging narrative forms, or mixing genres, to do so (such as *Paloh* and *The Last Communist*).

Paloh depicts a six-month period and focuses on its two protagonists who are caught in difficult historical circumstances, namely a young Malay man, Ahmad, and a young Chinese woman, Siew Lan. The film opens in September 1945, but the opening scene is followed by two flashbacks before the film returns to chronological order to depict the complications of the period as each character attempts to make sense of their situation at a time when there is great tension between the different

racial communities. While the date of 15 August 1945, the day on which the Japanese surrendered, is an important historical date, other dates given in the film are not critical points in history, but they are critical dates for the protagonists.

Table 6: Historical Timeline used in the film *Paloh* (2003)

Timeline/Date	Event(s) in the film *Paloh*
15 August 1945	The opening prologue declares Japan's surrender on 15 August 1945 and explains the chaotic aftermath with the Chinese seeking vengeance especially on those whom they thought of as traitors. Ahmad looks for Siew Lan in the village.
23 May 1945	[Flashback] Ahmad watches as Japanese soldiers kill and decapitate Chinese civilians on the streets of his hometown. The film sets up the nature of Ahmad and Siew Lan's relationship as they meet at a brothel.
	[Flashback] Ahmad, as a serving Japanese policeman, recalls a night raid on a Chinese farmer's home where he failed to protect the family who were later killed.
27 May 1945	A calmer period during Japanese occupation as Ahmad is free to pursue certain interests. Ahmad and Siew Lan's relationship grows.
23 July 1945	Leaving Siew Lan, Ahmad heads home to visit his sick father and this causes the future of their relationship to become uncertain.
30 July 1945	With Ahmad away, Siew Lan decides to kill herself. A frantic Ahmad returns to a gravely ill Siew Lan.
15 August 1945	Ahmad is in hospital, injured during the confrontation with Ah Meng prior to the arrival of Japanese troops at the hideout.
17 October 1945	Siew Lan is seen with the communists where she is on trial for her relationship with Ahmad.
15 November 1945	Ahmad joins the communist in search of Siew Lan. He finally finds her and they are reunited.

The film *Paloh* begins with the following prologue, which is both narrated and typed onto the screen:

> The Japanese surrendered on 15 August 1945. One month later, on 15 September 1945, Force 136 moved all P.O.W.s to their prison camps. The Japanese vented their vengeance on the Chinese in Malaya. Almost 60,000 Chinese were murdered during the Sook Ching Massacre of 1941. The time has come for the Chinese to get even, when Force 136 began to support their guerrilla movement.

> Chaos reigned. Those suspected of working for the Japanese were ruthlessly murdered and labelled as traitors. In September 1945, the people of Malaya were forced to live in hardship and poverty, a result of the power struggle between the Japanese and the British empires.

This opening prologue of the film is set against a background of sepia archival footage of soldiers' boarding a train bearing the Union Jack. Within the first one and a half minutes of the film, Osman (the narrator of the film) establishes the conflicting situation of the one-month period between the Japanese surrender and the return of the British. Osman establishes that the Japanese occupation of Malaya had caused great anger among the Chinese, especially after the Sook Ching Massacre. After 15 August 1945 there was a one-month absence of any form of authoritative governance in Malaya, and this had allowed the Chinese communists, actively involved in the fight against the Japanese during the war, to seek vengeance on those Malays who had served the Japanese, especially Malays who had worked as police officers. These climactic traumatic events set the tone for the narrative of earlier periods which occupies much of the rest of the film.

While initially Osman might be thought to be the main protagonist of the film, his own role in events is not clearly established in the film and he remains primarily a witness to the events rather than a participant. Osman wishes to tell the tale of his friend Ahmad, the film's main male protagonist, and Ahmad's search for Siew Lan. The subsequent scenes after the surrender of the Japanese establish the Chinese community's joy at being free of the Japanese. The film also indicates the acceptance of the communists by the mass population, who see them as a crucial

element in ridding the country of their Japanese oppressors. However, as the communists continue to recruit new comrades to be trained (for the ensuing struggle with the British) at training camps along the Malaya-Thai border, the film singles out Ahmad amidst the crowd. This opening scene provides a panoramic view of history. It establishes a number of troubled and complex circumstances – the role of the communists in post-Japanese Malaya, the position of the Chinese as communist supporters, the conflicting position of the Malays, and a relationship between a Malay man and a Chinese woman.

The film centres on the plight of its protagonists as historical agents. The film's emphasis on the dilemmas of its individual characters as they react and interact with the choices and decisions they make are primarily based on the demands and pressures of a complex period in history. The characters agency, in both Ahmad and Siew Lan, is not only determined by history, but also by their race. Within ten minutes into the film, Ahmad is shown as someone who tries to live outside violence. As the film moves back in time to the war period, we learn that Ahmad's employment as a Malay working as a Japanese police officer was unavoidable. He is constantly under threat of violence from both the Japanese occupying forces, and from the Chinese communist underground forces, for he too is seen as the enemy.

As the film begins to concentrate on the individual by linking the protagonist's experiences to events and dates, it also reveals the building up of a specific set of conflicts. In a flashback scene early in the film Ahmad stares out across a street and witnesses the decapitation of a number of Chinese civilians, one

of them a pregnant woman. Ahmad is trapped in his own personal world of remorse and guilt, feeling that as a policeman working for the Japanese he is part of the violence perpetrated on the Chinese. A dated flashback to 25 May 1945 signifies for Ahmad, his first, violent experience while in service for the Japanese. The flashback is to a phantasmagorical night scene, where through the confusing play of lights and sound we become aware that what is happening is wanton violence and abuse of a Chinese family by Japanese forces. Amidst impressionistic images of people in silhouette and overwhelming noise, the scene presents a conflicting battle of moral decisions for Ahmad, as he attempts to protect the wife and child, while under orders to take the lives of innocent civilians. While the film has clearly established at the very beginning that at the end of the war the Chinese were killing anyone closely associated with the Japanese, this scene now depicts the Japanese wantonly killing innocent Chinese, thus explaining the motivation for later Chinese vengeance. Ahmad's experience of the two, the Japanese killing of the Chinese and later the revenge taken by the Chinese, influences him as a Malay in the decisions he takes in order to survive wartime circumstances.

In *Paloh*, Ahmad's role as the male protagonist functions more as that of an anti-hero, rather than as a hero, as his actions reveal not heroic deeds, but deeds that ensure his survival. This role is a reflection of the situation at the time, wherein many people, mainly Malays, hardly had any choice and were forced to join the Japanese administration in order to survive a traumatic period. While Ahmad does not openly oppose the Japanese, his actions show a latent attitude of rebellion towards them, and he continually foils numerous acts of violence the Japanese are about to perpetrate. For example, when a Japanese commander attempts to force himself on Siew Lan at

the police laundrette, as a distraction, Ahmad sets fire to a set of police uniforms outside. Ahmad's concern for non-violence dominates his actions, and his traumatised experiences lead to his conflicting attitudes, as he tries to redeem himself from his perceived role as a forced collaborator by helping Siew Lan and his friends. By the end of the film Ahmad establishes himself sympathetically as a Malay who is conflicted and trapped in a very difficult situation as he does whatever necessary to survive but also to help others when he can.

– Parallel Characters, Parallel Goals and Parallel Gendered Historical Perspectives

Paloh attempts to not only deal with history but also with individuals and the different positions of the Chinese, and specifically the issue of relations between the Chinese communists and the Malays. Ahmad's role as the film's Malay protagonist is paralleled by that of Siew Lan, who is the film's Chinese female protagonist. Portrayed as Ahmad's love interest, Siew Lan also is an individualised representative of the pervading dilemmas facing the Chinese community as they struggle to survive Japanese occupation. At the beginning of the film (i.e. September 1945), Siew Lan is seen being loaded onto a truck as the Chinese communists take their Chinese comrades to the Malay-Thai border for retraining. This scene establishes that Siew Lan is being taken away from Ahmad, who at that moment is searching for her in the crowd. However, at this stage the true relationship between Ahmad and Siew Lan is unclear. The narration of their relationship only begins at a point in a series of flashbacks, where after Ahmad witnesses the beheading of Chinese civilians on a rainy afternoon, the film moves to show the nature of his relationship with Siew Lan.

Siew Lan functions as a parallel character to Ahmad, where while Ahmad represents the complexity faced by the individual Malay man, Siew Lan reflects the dilemmas faced by the individual Chinese girl. As a result of pressure put on her family by the Chinese communist underground forces, in order for Siew Lan and her family to survive, she is forced to spy on the Japanese by forming a bond with Ahmad who works at the Japanese-run Paloh police station. In addition, Siew Lan also works at the police laundrette located at the same premises. In this regard, Siew Lan uses her femininity as a non-threatening tool in accomplishing her father's wishes of spying on the Japanese. However, while Siew Lan's initial relationship with Ahmad was coerced by her father, Siew Lan's faked feelings for Ahmad gradually turns to become genuine affection. Towards the end of the film, Siew Lan's affections for Ahmad lead her to save him from an impending attack on the police station by the Chinese communists. Unfortunately, upon finding out about the attack on the police station, and discovering the death of his young friend, Puteh, Ahmad angrily seeks revenge on the Chinese.

While Ahmad and Siew Lan are well-defined, individualised characters, two additional figures, who are primarily used to represent the broad attitudes of the Malay and Chinese communities, are also brought to attention in the film. Firstly, there is the figure of Ariffin Noor, a Malay community leader, who is used by the film to give voice to the attitudes of the local Malay community. From the very beginning, Ariffin Noor disagrees with Ahmad's service as a Japanese police officer, and believes that as a Malay, Ahmad should not support the occupiers in any form, especially in their violent acts against innocent villagers. However, while Ariffin Noor disagrees with unfolding events, he takes no action in dealing with the

Japanese. He does not take arms, like the Chinese communists, nor does he oppose the Japanese in any way to disrupt their rule of Paloh. It is thus implied that the Malays did not play a significant role in fighting the Japanese occupation, and preferred to follow unfolding events without entering into the conflicts.

One explanation for the lack of action by the Malays is the fact that historically the Malays had never considered the Japanese their enemy. The Malays were never at war with the Japanese prior to 1942 and considered Japan as an Asian neighbour. However, this is a very different state of mind in comparison to the Chinese Malayans who were loyal to mainland China and had supported the Chinese during the Sino-Japanese War in 1938, particularly through community-originating donations to the war effort in China. It was the Japanese distrust of the Chinese in Malaya and Singapore that led to the Sook Ching Massacre in 1942. This in turn further intensified the animosity of the Chinese towards the Japanese and vice versa. As a representation of the Chinese community, Siew Lan's father, Ah Meng, functioned as the area's Min Yuen leader. The Min Yuen was a group of civilians who were not communists but who spied on the Japanese and provided the communists with supplies, and with information about developments in the area. However, as the film shows, Ah Meng's actions were primarily dominated by his devotion to his family and ensuring their safety, particularly wanting to protect them from the anger of the Chinese communists, as well as to protect his oppressed community from the highly suspicious Japanese.

The actions that guided both the individual agents and the group-oriented, community-based agents of the film are driven by situational circumstances that

required both communities to endure and survive Japanese occupation. Nevertheless, the film leads to a tragic and ambiguous end during the showdown at Siew Lan's house, when Ahmad angrily confronts Siew Lan's father, Ah Meng, and other gathered communist comrades, accusing them of being implicated in the attack by communist forces on the police station resulting in the deaths of his Malay friends. Ah Meng's response, where he attempts to justify the taking of all necessary measures to combat the Japanese, leads to a shootout between Ahmad and the gathered communists. In the end, Ah Meng dies and Ahmad is critically shot. However, Siew Lan and her mother manage to escape before approaching Japanese troops surround the house.

The complexity and indeed provocative nature of this courageous film is not only in the central representation of the relationship between a Malay Muslim man and a Chinese girl, but also in the conflicting dilemmas of the Chinese and the Malays, as represented through the roles of Ariffin Noor and Ah Meng. The film struggles to show that the positions of the Malays and the Chinese during Japanese Occupation were not totally different in so far as both communities were capable of caring and respecting one another, as well as capable of forming relationships. However, the treatment and attitudes of the Japanese towards both communities had created pressures that both ethnic groups struggled to control and balance. Both groups were caught up in a history that had consequences that neither would foresee, and which eventually would hinder the formation of a unified Malaysia.

Hence, there are two major points of innovation within *Paloh*, as it depicts the period of the final months of Japanese occupation. The first level of the film

shows the complexity of unfolding events and contradicts earlier efforts by Malaysian elites to demonise the Chinese communists, for the film shows that both the Malays and the Chinese were caught in an ambiguous and complex situation of survival. Secondly, while *Paloh* shows both these communities to be highly bonded group-oriented communities (as does a film such as *Bukit Kepong*), it is also interested in the individual's position within the group and the conflicts that arose between groups (as both took actions and made decisions that they thought necessary). Films such as *Bukit Kepong* and *Leftenan Adnan* do not have a complexity of this kind. Moreover the film emphasises that every man faces subjectivity when addressing issues of their own existential and moral dilemmas. *Paloh* is both about history and about individuals and is actually about the problems individuals have when they are caught in a conflicting situation in history, whether they became known heroes or not.

Throughout, *Paloh* never plays down either dimension (group or individual) and constantly makes the audience aware of the complexity of the situation of the Chinese as major targets of Japanese abuse and violence, and their need to resist the Japanese, a fact that is established early in the film. However, *Paloh* also examines the complexity faced by the Malays, who historically were not at a disadvantage but found themselves witness to – and at times unwilling participants in – acts of violence towards the Chinese. The film never loses sight both of the way in which history is to be perceived and the ways in which individuals facing individual dilemmas struggle with moral and social decisions. This is evident at the climax of the film when Ahmad confronts Ah Meng regarding the attack on the Paloh police station that resulted in the death of his friend, Puteh. Ah Meng justifies his actions as

vengeance towards the cruel treatment of the Japanese towards his race, and says that unfortunately Ahmad's friend, Puteh (a Malay), simply got caught in the crossfire, while Ahmad responds sardonically that Ah Meng's actions, however heroic, should not be at the cost of the death of innocent people. These morally ambiguous situations lead to no resolution as both sides believed in the actions they took to ensure their survival.

As a matter of fact, prior to *Paloh* there were two films with regards to Malaysian history that are not discussed in this chapter due to limited accessibility to the films themselves. The films are *Jasmin* (Jamil Sulong, 1984) and *Yassin* (Kamarul Ariffin Mohamed Yassin, 1988). According to Hatta Azad Khan, the film *Jasmin*, "tried to take a look at the spirit of Malay nationalism against the backdrop of British colonial rule in the fifties."[212] It was inspired by the Maria Hertogh riots (also known as the Nadrah riots) that began in Singapore on 11 December 1950, and shows actions of nationalist Malays in opposing a ruling by the Chief Justice. The riots began in opposition to the return to her Dutch Christian parents of the child Maria Hertogh/Nadrah who had been raised by her Malay Muslim foster mother. Set against 1950s colonial British rule, the film highlights the Malay Muslims' opposition towards rulings being made under British Christian law. A result of the riots, mainly in the name of religion, 18 people were killed, 173 people were injured and numerous accounts of loss of property and damages.[213] The film was produced by producer/filmmaker Kamarul Ariffin who, according to Hatta Azad Khan, is 'the most nationalistic' of Malaysian filmmakers, given the themes addressed in the films

[212] Hatta Azad Khan. "The Independence Era, 1976-86." *The Malay Cinema*. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press, 1997. 135.

[213] Khan, "The Making of a National Cinema." *The Malay Cinema* 197-199.

of Kamarul Ariffin, which Khan, as the quote below explains, address Malay issues in the most honest of terms.[214] However, no copy of the film can be found.

Another film that is inaccessible and not distributed is Kamarul Ariffin's *Yassin* (1988).[215] The film portrays the Malays and Chinese during the last few days of the Japanese occupation in Malaya. Much like the film *Paloh* discussed in this chapter, Khan believes Kamarul explores the strained and vindictive relationship between the two races, particularly in Malayan society during the 1940s. According to Khan, *Yassin* tells the story of a man who was tried by the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army, or the 'Bintang Tiga', for allegedly helping the Japanese during the Pacific War.[216] While the award winning films of *Jasmin* and *Yassin* remain inaccessible, Khan believes that:

> If *Yassin* were the model for a basic national cinema and young Malaysian film-makers were willing to study the truth about the country's history and cultural heritages as well as its present day multi-racial structure, we would

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[214] Khan, "The Making of a National Cinema." *The Malay Cinema* 213.

[215] Arkib Negara Malaysia (trans. National Archives of Malaysia), 29 December 2009. http://www.arkib.gov.my/kamarul_ariffin# Accessed: 16 May 2011. – [Tan Sri] Kamarul Ariffin was born on 12 August 1934. A Malay politician and businessman, Kamarul Ariffin was raised in a village in the town of Mentakab, Pahang. Based on his personal experience of watching his father trailed by 'the peoples' court' (or 'the kangaroo court') set up by the communist allied *Bintang Tiga* in September 1945, Kamarul Ariffin went to London to study law. After successfully practicing law in the 1960s, and after the 13 May 1969 racial riots, Kamarul Ariffin became a member of the Dewan Negara (a Senate member) and held the post for 10 years. In 1976, Kamarul Ariffin was asked by the government to serve the nation by heading and holding numerous prestigious posts within and outside government. Kamarul Ariffin began to dabble in filmmaking when he produced *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (Jamil Sulong, 1983), and later, produced and wrote the screenplay for *Jasmin* (1984). His first film as a director was *Jasmin 2* (1986), which he also wrote and produced.

[216] Khan, "The Making of a National Cinema." *The Malay Cinema* 213.

then be on the right track towards creating a national cinema for all Malaysian as well as for the world at large.[217]

The film *Paloh* therefore marks a significant shift in the manner Malaysian history is represented as it acknowledges suppressed and untold history, particularly as to the role of the communists during the transition period between the Japanese surrender and the return of the British. Apart from its importance as a film that recovers suppressed history, its uniqueness comes from the manner in which it deals with the subjectivity of the people who did not have a clear path to follow. *Paloh's* efforts to draw attention to inherently and unavoidably divisive situations faced by the society of the time is the film's main priority, emphasising that all the races faced difficult and often conflicting situations in order to survive a traumatic history. While issues of popular memory are raised by the depiction of the experiences faced by the characters in the film, their experiences are shown to be linked to a traumatic, complicated and difficult time. In acknowledging the role of the Chinese communists in their fight against the Japanese, the film has shifted from a hegemonically Malay historical film, to one that represents the 'significant other' in the nation's history. Coincidentally enough, this acknowledgement of 'the other' in Malaysian historical films is also addressed and exemplified by independent filmmaker, Amir Muhammad through his historical documentaries, *The Last Communist* and and *Village People Radio Show* as he attempts to identify and tell this same history from a different point of view and covering wider historical periods.

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[217] Khan, "The Making of a National Cinema." *The Malay Cinema* 214.

The Recovery of History: *The Last Communist* (2006)

In trying to present everything in epic terms, the depiction of popular memory of the communities of the time causes a loss in the diversity of peoples' experiences, and as a result, only familiar history is told. However, while *Paloh* signifies the beginning of representing a different side of history, Malaysian independent filmmaker Amir Muhammad explores and questions the nation's history as it is told, the argument being that the notion of the epic is not the only way for history to be examined. The communal memory that was formed is now forgotten in modern Malaysia as the Malays do not want to know more about it and the Chinese and their families would rather forget about it. But for some Chinese, their sense of history and their popular memory is different from the Malays, and that is what is reflected in Amir's films. This period in the nation's history needs examination not because it created an everlasting traumatic popular memory but it also reflects the experience that the people underwent at the time. It was an experience that influenced and formed the perspectives that both communities had for one another.

Amir Muhammad is considered one of Malaysia's most significant independent filmmakers. He has specialised in making light hearted but fundamentally serious political documentaries that are designed to provoke mild controversy, and constitute a gentle challenge to establishment views. In the last few years he has made two documentaries about surviving members of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), which opposed the Japanese during World War II, and then continued a campaign to rid Malaya of the British, culminating in the Malayan Emergency of 1948 to 1960. The films are *The Last Communist* in 2006 and *Village*

People Radio Show in 2007. Both of these films were banned on being submitted to the Malaysian Censorship Board. They cannot be screened publicly in Malaysia, though they have been shown internationally at film festivals, where they have been well received.[218]

The following discussion explores the first of these films, *The Last Communist*, which recounts the life journey of Chin Peng, the leader of the CPM. The film recounts Chin Peng's story as well as those of other communists in Malaya at the time, and what it means to people in Malaysia today. The film was initiated as one response to the publication of Chin Peng's biography, *My Side of History* (2003). The discussion asks what it is that Amir is saying about these communists, what are his methods for representing them, and why his documentary takes the form it does.[219] *The Last Communist* presents a more diverse view of the communists in a way that counters official establishment views of the movement, but that it is primarily about how they may be viewed in the present, rather than being an account of their past actions. By returning to this forgotten history, the film also reminds us that these members of the CPM, through their opposition to the return of the British, however controversial at times, made a contribution to the eventual achievement of independence, and hence to the creation of present day Malaysia. The film in effect counters ideas that communists are a continuing threat to Malaysia and that anyone associated with communism should be demonised.

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[218] *The Last Communist* was premiered at the 2006 Berlin International Film Festival, and was also screened at the Seattle International Film Festival and the London Film Festival.

[219] Chin Peng. *My Side of History*. Singapore: Media Masters, 2003.

In the opening scene of *The Last Communist* the audience is positioned looking along the side of a moving car, as it travels a well paved modern road and crosses a bridge. Even as early as this first shot, the film signals some of its intentions: this is to be a relaxed journey, a road movie, and the bridge perhaps signals the idea of a transition – a transition in both time, and thought. The car continues its journey and the film's title appears, *The Last Communist*, in which the word 'Communist' is highlighted with a provocative momentary red-tinged colouring, and the sound of a 'ping'. This kind of mild provocation and eloquent use of film language is what has gained Amir both recognition and criticism from the Malaysian public. Nevertheless, this has never prevented Amir from pursuing his exploration of numerous national sensitivities within his films. Examples are evident in three other of his films, *The Big Durian* (2004), *6Shorts* (2006), and his most recent instalment, *Malaysian Gods* (2008). In most of these films, through the use of songs, Amir humorously juxtaposes a range of issues such as racial ties and racial tensions, state interference in everyday life, hypocrisy in sexual matters, and the cult of deference to ministers and politicians, issues about which the truth is rarely told in Malaysia.

– *The Last Communist* and the Stories Within

The Last Communist is a semi-musical travel documentary. It aims to ease the audiences regard towards the issue of communism, precisely because communism remains a very sensitive issue in Malaysia, especially given the prominence in

Malaysian history of the Malayan Emergency.[220] Tracing Chin Peng's past and his role within the CPM, the film presents history and facts in two time dimensions, which are juxtaposed together simultaneously: the past, and the present. The film engages with the past by presenting, in chronological order, basic facts about Chin Peng's life. It traces Chin Peng's travels around Malaya and highlights important decisions he made. Through the use of titles briefly superimposed against a background of present day footage, each scene/segment introduces and explores the various towns in which Chin Peng once lived and the events that occurred in each of them. The scenes shifts from place to place, retracing Chin Peng's journey (as indicated by the earlier travelling car) and provides a simple linear account of the basic facts of his story, mainly from 1938 to 1955.

The film begins in Chin Peng's hometown of Sitiawan and describes his early childhood growing up in British colonial Malaya. The film identifies the school where Chin Peng first began to hear about communism, and subsequently continues on to other towns, outlining his involvement in the underground campaigns against the Japanese, his eventual appointment as leader in 1947, and the killing of three British planters at Sungai Siput in Perak in 1948 that sparked the Emergency.[221] The second approach, and time dimension, that the film takes is to present contemporary life in Malaysia. In each of the places connected with Chin Peng that he visits, Amir

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[220] Andaya and Andaya. "The Functioning of a Colonial Society, 1919-57." *A History of Malaysia* 257-261. Andaya and Andaya suggest that the CPM was briefly in a position to seize power in the interim between the Japanese surrender and the return of the British in September 1945. After the British declined to grant Malaya its independence, the CPM declared war (through guerilla tactics) on the British.

[221] Andaya and Andaya. "The Functioning of a Colonial Society, 1919-57." *A History of Malaysia* 258. "A spate of murders and attacks on European estate managers in June 1948 alerted the authorities to a change of direction in MCP policy… [the] continuing murders of Europeans on the estates finally forced the government to proclaim a State of Emergency throughout Malaya on 18 June 1948."

conducts interviews with local people, often about what they know of communist actions in the areas approximately sixty years ago. Through this real time filmed interviews, contemporary history is summoned and captured by the camera as people talk about their pasts, their present lives, and their future aspirations.

Here, there is a sense of how people remember communists from their region. However, often, they know little of this and talk about their current lives which display a number of pre-occupations such as farmer or baker. At times the issues are relevant to topical issues in contemporary Malaysia (which Amir has dealt with in other films), others tangential to them. Sometimes, even, racial tensions appear innocuous, and communism forgotten, for example, in the sequence filmed in Bidor (where an agreement between the CPM and the British was signed in December 1943), as three contented young Indian men, Petai bean sellers (also known as 'The Petai Boys') jokingly classify three types of the bean they sell in terms of which racial group favours which type of Petai bean the most. Hence, while the film traces Chin Peng's story and history, it also captures the stories of contemporary Malaysians, as they reflect on their lives, possibly not so different to the life of the young Chin Peng.

This dual sense of history in the film, unusual in documentary, creates a very different sense of time – a time of the past and a time of the present, in which the time of the present tends to efface the time of the past, or to bring it back in new and unexpected ways. In the course of interviews, a diverse range of attitudes towards Chin Peng and the communist movement come to light. And while the Malaysian state and the Malaysian establishment appears to hold one view (as found in official

history books and government media), Amir's film presents a more diverse picture. Contrary to the government's efforts to discredit Chin Peng and the role of the CPM during the Japanese occupation and the guerrilla war against the British, there are Malaysians who differ in their attitudes. In effect, the film reveals that there are people in Malaysia (mainly those from the Chinese community) who have good memories of the underground communist movement against the Japanese.

For instance, there is a story told by a young Chinese bun maker, Lee Eng Kew, interviewed by Amir in Taiping, Perak. He tells a story about a young Chinese boy who joined the CPM to fight the Japanese but who was captured and brutally tortured. During his captivity, the young man had a dream of a deity who fed him lotus petals, inspiring him to live on. Surviving Japanese captivity, and nursed back to health in his hometown, the young man later rejoined his comrades in the jungle to fight for independence against the British, after which he never returned. After he disappeared, his mother began to make buns with flower petals in memory of her lost son, in the hope that he would return. This story shows how a personal memory is transformed into a localised folk memory, via the buns with lotus petals, the origins of which are widely known in Taiping. Ironically, these buns of communist commemorative origin are now popular all over Malaysia. The retelling in the film circulates a local popular memory that counters the national demonisation of the communists, by giving the point of view of the Chinese Taiping community, who have memories of a Chinese communist hero who ultimately sacrificed himself in the name of independence, and whose own family suffered grief at his loss. The idea of the communist as only being a threat is negated in the film, because there are people who tell good stories about them, and history is discovered in new ways. This effect

within the film is done innocently as it is the mother's personal experience that becomes the source of legends and a positive element of hope during troubled times, where very ordinary people get caught up in difficult events.

Another story that reflects both how the communists operated, and how local attitudes to them were manipulated during the emergency, is told by Sallehuddin Abdul Ghani, a Malay interviewee. As a naive, very young boy he was recruited by a beautiful female communist, and he reveals fond memories of this encounter, for he was not forced or coerced into joining the communists. However, he later secretly worked for the British when the British offered large sums of money (approximately 500 ringgit per person) for the capture of communists in his village, resulting in his turning in to the British his uncle and cousin, who were members of the communist party.[222] This story however forms a slightly disjunctive portrait of Malays, because the adult, and by now apparently retired, Sallehuddin appears to have no regret at betraying family members when he was a child (perhaps not an issue at the time due to his young age). But neither does he address in his interview his family's reaction towards the capture of his uncle and cousin, nor does Amir question him about this. Amir, of course, does not appear in the film, but even so in the course of the interview these circumstances could have been further explored.

In terms of the narrative past, events unfold rapidly as the Japanese leave, the British return, and the CPM are betrayed by their wartime leader, the Vietnamese Lai Te, allowing for Chin Peng to take over, and it is during his leadership that the

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[222] According to the film, Sallehuddin was offered RM500 per Malay communist and a special reward of RM2000 for the Chinese communist.

Emergency is declared.[223] The climax of this history is almost certainly the account of the massacre of three British planters at Sungai Siput, Perak in 1948 that led to the declaration of the Malayan Emergency.[224] The extent of the involvement of the Party leadership in the planning of these local killings is not fully resolved in the film, though the event is seen as a turning point which galvanises the British response and ushers in the Emergency. To some extent in the film Chinese and Malay interviewees tend to have different memories of the communists. While some Chinese have good memories about the communists and their role in history, the Malays are less committed in their views about the CPM. However, one attitude that is commonly found in contemporary Malaysian society is that while it is sometimes admitted that the CPM did play some role in Malaysia gaining its independence from the British, they were people who were primarily evil and violent.

One scene in the film that depicts this is when Amir identifies a well known teacher's training college in Tanjung Malim and states that many Malay intellectuals were trained there. As Amir interviews a Muslim Malay girl (she appears to be a student from the college), he reveals that her perception of the history of the period is very much a text book recital of the Malaysian establishment's perspective, one that is told in all school text books. There is a sense that the negative perceptions of the communists have and continue to be that formed by the state. Thus, the resulting

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[223] Stubbs, R. "The Path of Revolution." *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989. 58. Lai Te's betrayal of the CPM as a triple agent nearly destroys the CPM movement as he runs off with the Party's funds. However, this betrayal forces Party leaders to put Chin Peng in charge even though he is young and untested in any leadership positions prior to this.

[224] Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds*, 1989. 61. On 16 June 1948, three British planters in the Sungai Siput area of Perak were killed… On 18 June 1948, a State of Emergency was proclaimed for the whole of Malaya.

attitude of the film, only indirectly presented, is that the state demonises the communists. However, there is a perception that contemporary Malaysian society needs to now move on as present circumstances are not what they used to be sixty years ago. In addition, the intellectual perception of the overall Malaysian society too should also change with the times.

The Last Communist has a running time of ninety minutes and can be divided into two parts. The first hour of the film focuses on contemporary Malaysia and the ways in which Chin Peng's life is still reflected in it, or not. At the end of this first hour, the film shifts to Southern Thailand, and presents interviews with former CPM members now living there in exile. Those interviewed are all Chinese. In Thailand, they form a community that has the official backing of the Thai government and live in a village, known as the 'Peace Village'. The Peace Village was established in 1989, at the time of the Peace Settlement between the Malaysian Government and the CPM. The official title of the village is, the 10th Village of the Princess Chulabhorn, and the village is established under the patronage of the youngest daughter of the current King of Thailand. The present lives of these former communist members, and their families, are far removed from the dilemmas and conflicts of World War II, the freedom struggle and the Emergency. In their interviews it becomes clear why they made the decisions they did - they were ideologically motivated to win independence for Malaya. There is also some discussion of the morality of some of the actions taken by the CPM, and they admit that some mistakes were made. The picture presented in this part of the film, of the lives they are leading now, is in sharp contrast to the past they conjure up in the stories they tell of the Emergency period. This works to reinforce the impression of

the first hour of the film, that times have significantly changed and that no one is living in a situation of crisis now.

– Song Sequences: Bollywood with a Brechtian Influence

The breezy slightly provocative style of the film is further developed through its musical interludes and specifically designed song sequences. This style is broadly of the kind found in a Bollywood musical. In addition, while some of the songs appear substantially modelled on the Bollywood style, others are mellower or mock popular patriotic Malay songs of the 1970s and 1980s that was shown on government television, RTM (Radio Television Malaysia). The mellower songs on the other hand, are often found in the P. Ramlee films of the 1950s and 1960s, made in the 'Golden Age' of the Singapore Malay cinema. However, the songs in Amir's film have a distinct edge to them. They are designed to make the audience feel slightly uncomfortable. Instead of the participants singing of love, loss or sorrow, they sing of issues such as the economy, tin and rubber, war, illness (malaria), identity cards, and even communism, or the fear of communism. The songs are performed in a satirical manner, by singers who are at times Malay, Indian, Chinese and Eurasian, and who sometimes sing alone and sometimes in groups.

For example, there is even one song that sings romantically of Malaysia's role in the world economy as the foremost supplier of tin and rubber. This song is satirically presented as a young Chinese woman stands on a bridge by a waterfall. The waterfall is presumably located near an old mine and she sings her thankfulness for the bounty of the country. The interruption of the flow of the documentary here,

the sardonic tone of the address to the audience by the singer, and the unromantic nature of the song's topic all show the distinctive influence of Berthold Brecht. The Brechtianization of the songs produces a detached sardonic tone that mocks the values of both governments and the global media. The government and the media represent parties who are obsessed with market economy, economic rationalism and neoliberal economics.

In addition, the song on identity cards attacks the excessive surveillance of the Malaysian state. Not only is the use of the identity cards an attempt to hound communists but it is also a means of justifying the states authoritative power. Other songs in the film are based on Bollywood styled colourful costumes and strong rhythms. This is demonstrated in the song on Communism and the Socialist Revolution, sung around a red-hooded Ku Klux Klan like figure symbolising communism. The effect of all this is not only the mockery of dominant Malaysian attitudes and ideologies, but to varying degrees destabilizes the attitudes the viewer. The songs work against normal conventions and expectations.

– Filmic and Historical Absences within *The Last Communist*

This loosely structured and partly improvised film in *The Last Communist* nevertheless, has a number of absences or gaps in it. For example, a more comprehensive and systematically planned historical documentary would have shown how in the 1930s Chinese in Malaya followed closely the progress of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and supported the resistance in China by sending money back to their homeland. Overseas Chinese (especially those in

Southeast Asia) were mortally affected by the invasion of the motherland by Japan, and the numerous reports of atrocities there. Nor is there any mention in the film of the notorious Sook Ching massacres in the weeks following the fall of Singapore in February 1942, when possibly up to 25,000 Chinese, regarded as potentially subversive, were murdered by the Japanese.[225] These absences are partly a consequence of the film's reluctance to engage too closely with all the historical facts, preferring to shift between past and present, and avoid presenting an over-systematic and perhaps closed and final view of history.

Some of the absences in the film are not oversights as to content, but are related to the stratagems and apparent aims of the film and the way it has been structured. These further structural absences are as follows. Firstly, although Amir titles the film *The Last Communist*, Chin Peng never appears in the film, even though he is still alive and living in Southern Thailand at the time the film was made. Chin Peng's absence throughout the film remains unclear, in that no explanation for this absence is provided at any point.[226] The result is that while the first hour of the film is directly about Chin Peng, the last third of the film is not about Chin Peng, 'the last communist', but about the many surviving communists living in exile. It is perhaps they who are the real subject of the film, in that it is their lives and situations that are

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[225] Andaya and Andaya, "The Functioning of a Colonial Society, 1919-57." *A History of Malaysia* 250. "The long and bitter Chinese struggle to oust the Japanese invaders from their homeland had been generously supported by funds from overseas Chinese… To root out these enemies, the Japanese systematically rounded up all the Chinese male population of Singapore in the first week of the Occupation and massacred thousands, estimated between 5,000 and 25,000." This systematic killing of the Singaporean Chinese is also referred to as the Sook Ching massacre which in Chinese means 'a purge through cleansing'.

[226] Although Amir tried to get in touch with Chin Peng for the film, no form of communication or response could be established with Chin Peng by the completion of the shoot. (Statement by Amir Muhammad at a forum on the film at the Southeast Asian Cinema Studies Conference, Kuala Lumpur, December 2006).

most likely to engage the feelings of the viewers. Secondly, Amir does not interview any of the former Malay communists living in Thailand, even though they live in a similar Peace Village only ten kilometres away from their former Chinese comrades (the film suggests their living in separate villages was an amicable decision taken in order to avoid possible conflicts between two races with different traditions, and with different religions). However, Amir has subsequently rectified this omission by making *Village People Radio Show*, a more conventional documentary, about Malay members of the communist party living in Thailand. Thirdly, and most significantly, when the Malaysian government, with the help of the Thai government, arrived at a peace agreement with the CPM in 1989, substantial numbers of communists living in Thailand were permitted to return and take up their lives again in Malaysia. But those communists who returned to Malaysia are not interviewed in the film at any point, neither in the first hour, when Amir is touring Malaysia, revisiting the towns where Chin Peng lived, worked or operated for the CPM, nor in the last third of the film at the time when the film is cutting between interviews with various ethnically Chinese communists living in Thailand.

Why are these omissions in the film? Answers one might give are as follows. Firstly, Chin Peng is used to provide a high profile central focus for the film that could not have been provided by the lesser surviving communists. As well, if the film had visited the towns of other communists it would have been over complicated and over long. But the tactic of touring contemporary Malaysia and juxtaposing the recent history of a changed Malaysia with the outline of the history of Chin Peng in a mid twentieth century Malaya is fundamental to the project of the film. By doing this the film is able to challenge the hegemony of the tightly narrated and comprehensive

historical documentary and to pose a view of history as constant change. Amir clearly wanted to avoid the idea that the film should make tight or absolute judgements about those whose active lives were lived in very different historical times. One may still speculate as to why no returned communists are interviewed. This may have focused the film too much on the history rather than the present. As well, those who returned were not entirely free but were subject to certain requirements of reporting. This in itself could be the subject of another film, opening numerous thorny issues not addressed in the first two parts of this potentially open ended project.

Nevertheless, Amir's semi-musical travel documentary traces the life of Chin Peng through the use of inter-titles as the filmmaker travels through contemporary present day Malaysia visiting the towns that Chin Peng passed through some sixty years ago. In contrasting life in the past and life in the present, the film highlights how the overall life of the nation and its society has changed within the past fifty years, from a time of war during Chin Peng's era and a time of peace in modern day Malaysia. While the film does highlight the unfolding historical experiences of Chin Peng, it mainly focuses on the life of the people today – of their simple joys, dreams and aspirations for the future. The film takes a more general outlook on history in such that the documented facts of Chin Peng's life are considered common history, and those insights into the peoples' lives are of a greater consequence. However, the filmmaker leaves the interpretation of the overall film to the individual audience, leaving the film totally ambiguous and subjective. Hence, while *The Last Communist* presents the perspective of the Chinese communists in exile, his film *Village People Radio Show* functions as its coda, as it was made in response to criticism that he

should have made a film about the Malay communists also in exile in Southern Thailand. In this film Amir uncovers the suppressed history of those Malays who joined their Chinese brothers and sisters in the Communist Party of Malaya.

Conclusion

Historical films made in Malaysia within the past fifty years primarily depict two significant time periods, as well as taking two different perspectives towards the histories they portray. The period of the Japanese occupation marked a significant turning point in Malaysian history not only politically but also socially. After the War in the Pacific, while Malaysia headed towards self-governance, with more administrative responsibilities given to them by the British, the British were slow to surrender full authoritative power to the Malay-led administration. Furthermore, the social impact of the Japanese occupation had resulted in a widening gap between the races in Malaya, due to the different situation of the various races during the occupation period and the resulting grievances subsequently. The second period sometimes depicted in Malaysian historical films is the Emergency period that preoccupied the emerging nation for twelve years, as the communists tried to gain independence for Malaya by ridding the nation of the British. Unfortunately, as the communists of the CPM were predominantly Chinese, the rift between the races further increased. Fear and anger during both periods in Malayan history had set up a conflicting relationship between the races, namely the Malays and the Chinese.

Asian historian and scholar, Wang Gungwu suggests that there are three different ways in which the past can be perceived, one that is significantly relevant to

the study of Southeast Asian history and the discussion of the historical films within this chapter:[227]

First, that perceptions (or sets of perceptions) of the past are the product of long centuries of social and political conditioning, the result of non-deliberate handing down of traditions, such as 'folk-memory'. Such is the case of in scenes in the film *Paloh* that depicts a communal solidarity and social harmony in the relationship between the elderly Malays and the Chinese community who trust one another unquestionably, and suggests periods of stability that came to serve the community in times of crisis.

Secondly, are perceptions from what had been, to what had become necessary or desirable. What is important is not the non-deliberate handing down of tradition, but a conscious change in the kinds of histories that are told, and in the way of telling them. Here a known history or one that is taken for granted is transformed or augmented to a new one, causing earlier perceptions to change according to the consciously perceived needs of a world around them that is changing. This approach to the past is found in Amir's *The Last Communist*, which questions official history and dominant ideologies. This in turn has paved the way for questions concerning the nation's 'true' history. In these more recent films, notions of heroism and historical agency become more complex and varied as perspectives of the others, such as the Chinese, are presented.

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[227] Wang Gungwu. "Introduction: The Study of the Southeast Asian Past." *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*. Eds. Anthony Reid, David Marr, et al. Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) for the Asian Studies Association of Australia, distributed by ANU Press, 1979. 2.

Thirdly, are perceptions of the past which (whatever minor modifications they undergo) reiterate a similar view, and receive institutional support. Gungwu suggests that they are distributed so widely that they come to ensure that certain ways of perceiving the past become 'indestructible'. For some time films such as *Sarjan Hassan*, *Leftenan Adnan* and *Bukit Kepong* played this role, confirming the hegemonic view of Malaysian society, but they in turn are now beginning to be replaced.

Malaysian historical films have now begun to evolve from predominantly hegemonic Malay films that focused on elements of bravery and patriotism of the individual Malays, or of the Malay community, to films that ideologically question and bring attention to a suppressed part of Malaysian history, and take into consideration the contribution of other races in the fight to defend the nation. *Paloh* significantly marks a turning point in Malaysian cinema, as this film addresses this issue of other races in Malay history, and thus questions the hegemonic vision of the nation. The resulting films not only rediscover a more complex view of the nation and its history, but open up more complex visions of what cinema can be, whether in fiction or documentary genres.

Chapter Four

Representation of Women in Historical Films about Early Modern Southeast Asia

Introduction

The following chapter takes a different approach towards history compared to the earlier two chapters. While the previous chapters discussed history with mostly male figures within them, this chapter (and the next) looks at the position of women in the historical film. It examines the representation of women in historical films of early modern Southeast Asia and investigates the nature of the women's historical film. The three main films in this chapter provide portraits of women within the context of fifteenth, seventeenth and mid-nineteenth century Southeast Asia and evaluate the positions of the female protagonists within them. In this chapter, although I invoke the theoretical positions of selected Western feminist film theorists, I argue that while their theories are applicable to most Hollywood women's films, the representation of women in the films from Southeast Asia that I examine requires somewhat different theoretical approaches.

One reason for the need for different approaches is that historians in Southeast Asia have tended to argue that at least within the early modern period in Southeast Asia, there is evidence that some women had greater economic independence and a higher status than was found in European countries and in the

Indian sub-continent.[223] While in two of the three films examined in this chapter the position of women in Java in the seventeenth century and of women in mid-nineteenth century Thailand (and earlier) is shown to be one where they can easily be made subject to dominant males, in all three films there is an attitude of respect towards the central female characters, showing their ingenuity and their capacity for creative initiative. At the same time we find to be important in these films elements of sensuality, but the desire of the female protagonist is not subjected to the kinds of voyeuristic investigation by males and by the camera, in a way where the woman is regarded as a threat, a characteristic of much Western cinema discussed by Laura Mulvey.[224]

In this chapter, I discuss and provide an analysis of three historical films of women set in this early modern era. Two films were made in Thailand and one was made in Indonesia. Historian Anthony Reid, who has done extensive pioneering research on this period, prefers to use the term 'early modern' to refer to this particular era on the following grounds:

> As historiography has begun to break out of a European mould and consider comparative questions on a broader basis, the category Early Modern has gained currency. As against such older terms as Renaissance, Reformation, or Age of Discovery, it has the advantage of being less culture-bound to a European schema, less laden with triumphalist values. Nevertheless it has its own burden of associations, implying that it is in this period that we see the emergence of the forces which would shape the modern industrial world.

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[223] Reid, *Modern Asian Studies* 629-632.

[224] Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Macmillan, 1989.

> That implication seems acceptable at the global level, provided there is no suggestion that all its constituents were somehow locked into the same path. Definitions vary, but all those who use the term early modern include in it the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with more or less extension backward in the fifteenth and forward into the eighteenth. [225]

In fact in this chapter the last film discussed, *Muen and Rid*, is set in mid-nineteenth century Thailand, but the 'feudal' story it tells (or its narrative of a woman's escape from a feudal situation) is hardly that of a modern situation. Indeed, all the stories in the films discussed in this chapter are narratives set in societies that manifest feudal attitudes in the way that the female characters in the films, unless they are among the elites of the society (as is the character Suriyothai), are regarded in some way as the property, or the potential property, of others. This is the definition of the term feudal as it is used in this chapter. [226]

The term 'early modern' is also used to highlight the contrast with the stories told in the films analysed in the next chapter, 'Chapter Five – Women in Transition to the Modern', which are all stories about a transition from feudal attitudes to women, to modern attitudes to women, an historical change for which women have to struggle via political means, struggles which all the films show. The film *Muen*

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[225] Reid, Anthony. "Introduction: Early Modern Southeast Asia." *Charting the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000. 6.

[226] There has been much debate about what the term feudal refers to, in view of its exceptionally varied uses. Historian Richard Abel makes the following points: "'Feudalism' is not a medieval term; nor does it have a single, agreed upon, meaning… 'Feudalism', on the other hand, is a historical construct that one must define before using… The definition of 'feudalism' favored by Marxist historians focuses on the economic and juridical privileges enjoyed by a landowning aristocracy over a subordinate peasantry." For further reading refer to: Richard Abels. "The Historiography of a Construct: "Feudalism" and the Medieval Historian." *History Compass*. 7/3 (2009), 1008-1031.

and Rid, in fact, in its story of a woman's courageous elopement punishable by prison and even death, which is resolved only at the very end by a sudden and unexpected intervention of the Thai king (and is the only film of the three discussed in this chapter which ends with its female central protagonist still alive), marks the beginnings of a woman's transition to the transition to the modern.

Just as the films within this chapter are made in different countries and are set in different centuries, they also use different historically based narrative forms, forms different from the modern form of narration found in the film *Gandhi,* which is a structured 'biopic' making close reference to known historical detail. The historical films within this chapter, while depicting the lives of their protagonists, more often display elements of the chronicle, the legend or the folktale. This is due to the form of the sources on which they are based, and also due to the lack of historical knowledge and resources detailing early centuries of Southeast Asia. The Thai film *The Legend of Suriyothai* (Chatri Chalerm Yukol, 2001), set in fifteenth century Ayutthaya, is a chronicle based on the reading of the royal Thai chronicles, though some of those chronicles were written centuries later than the period in which the film is set.[227] The Indonesian film *Roro Mendut* (Ami Priyono, 1983) on the other hand, is a folktale, based on a story that has been played for decades in *kethoprak* drama.[228] It is realistically told and is set within a loosely defined but definite

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[227] Amporn Jirattikorn. "Suriyothai: Hybridizing Thai National Identity through Film." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies.* 4 (2), 2001.

[228] Hatley, Barbara. "Texts and Contexts: the Roro Mendut Folk Legend on Stage and Screen." *Histories and Stories: Cinema in New Order Indonesia.* Ed. Krishna Sen. Clayton: Monash University, 1988.

historical period of the seventeenth century Mataram empire in Central Java.[229] And the other Thai film, *Muen and Rid* (Cherd Songsri, 1994) is a tale set in mid-nineteenth century rural Thailand and is an examination of a moment in history, based on a brief note in court records from nineteenth century Thailand. The film locates its historical importance in depicting the advancement in the status of women from one of patriarchal oppression, as a consequence of the magnanimity and discernment of the Thai king.

Thus, in analysing the historical films within this chapter, the idea that the historical film can be categorised into sub-genres such as the chronicle, the legend and the folktale also arises. I believe that there is a complexity in defining the historical film, at times referred to as the historical epic, as often it overlaps with other genres, and this chapter therefore attempts to explore these categorisations. For example the narrative form on which *The Legend of Suriyothai* is based, the chronicle, is an early literary form dealing with history, and is broadly defined as a continuous historical account of events in order of time, that is written often without analysis or interpretation.[230] Historian of early Thailand, David K. Wyatt, suggests that the chronicle often demonstrates various phases of dynastic history, frequently presenting equally all factions of a turbulent political period as one ruler replaces another through murder, subversion and internal coups.[231] In Wyatt's opinion, the

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[229] Ricklefs. M.C. *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200.* 4th Ed. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. 38–140. The Mataram government was considered a massive power on the Java island as new states of the fourteenth and fifteenth century emerged. *Roro Mendut* nevertheless is set in the seventeenth century.

[230] This loose definition of the chronicle as presented in the Online Encyclopedia Britannica http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/116174/chronicle. Accessed: 18 November 2009.

[231] Wyatt, David K. "Ayudhya and its Neighbours." *Thailand: a Short History*. 2nd. Ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. 63–74. According to Wyatt, "For most Tai, real history must in some

period of fifteenth and sixteenth century Ayutthaya is known primarily through chronicled histories, and many details are missing. Gaps in history are suggestively filled in and the chronicle shapes itself as the expression of an 'assumed' chain of historical events, for in Wyatt's opinion, the chronicle contains elements of the 'unexplained', 'obscure', and at times 'untrustworthy'.[232]

The folktale, such as that of *Roro Mendut* on the other hand, differs from that of the chronicle. Loosely defined, the folktale is regarded as fiction:

> They are not considered as dogma or history, they may or may not have happened, and they are not to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, although it is often said that they are told only for amusement, they have other important functions, as the class of moral folktales should have suggested. Folktales may be set in any time and any place, and in this sense they are almost timeless and placeless.[233]

In this instance, the legendary Central Javanese folktale of Roro Mendut has been told and retold, though often in a number of different contexts. As Barbara Hatley suggests, each time the folktale is told or retold it is "interpreted in accordance with the circumstances of presentation, [and] the ideological preoccupations of the time."[234] And, in the case of the film *Roro Mendut*, the recreation of an historical

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sense have begun in the thirteenth century, for at that point nearly every chronicle changes in character. Whereas most of their chronicles up to that time are simply lists of kings or collections of legends, usually undated, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries they become the annals of states, replete with detailed accounts of religious events and wars, of dynastic conflicts and popular movements." 31.

[232] Wyatt, *Thailand: a Short History* 53-57.

[233] Bascom, William. "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives." *The Journal of American Folklore*. American Folklore Society. Vol. 78, 307 (Jan. – Mar. 1965). 4.

[234] Hatley, *Histories and Stories* 14.

period and of Mataram court life, and the absence of elements of supernatural beings, allows the story that is told to appear as a matter of history.[235]

Finally, the Thai historical film *Muen and Rid* presents the tale of Muen's emancipation from her father and the dominating men in her life. While it is based on court annals, due to the way in which the original material (which is only a brief note) is amplified by the film, it can be regarded as a tale that inculcates elements of the myth, the legend and the folktale, as it contains fictional elements of the folktale, as well as myths which are told, even though it presents itself, through its filmic realism, as a truthful account of what happened in the remote past:

> Myths are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual.[236]

The film *Muen and Rid* is might be considered as an exemplary tale for the emerging and modernising Thai State under the Chakri Dynasty, the current ruling house of Thailand, founded in 1782. While the film's focus throughout is on the female protagonist and the young monk Rid, the opening and concluding titles of the film affirm the importance of her story for Thai history. The end of the film subtly underlines the fact that the changes in her fortunes are entirely due to the forward looking decision taken by the benign Thai king, Rama IV (King Mongkut) who has intervened in her case, but who is never directly seen in the film but whose pervasive

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[235] Hatley, *Histories and Stories* 14.

[236] Bascom, *The Journal of American Folklore* 4.

presence is suggested by shots between trees of a royal barge making its way along the river Chaopraya.

This chapter thus introduces the position of the Southeast Asian women discussed in the films, in each case, as women with strong characteristics who endure an authoritarian feudal/patriarchal period. The discussion attempts to suggest that the women's individuality is based on their ingenuity, as these women challenge the idea that men for the most part should continue to dominate women. With regards to elements of eroticism and sensuality, found mainly in *Roro Mendut* and *Muen and Rid*, they play a role not simply as a focus of male desire (though they are that) but – as will be demonstrated in my discussion – part of the animating respect for the woman that mobilizes support for her, thus contributing to women's liberation from within the feudal. The historical films that I discuss present a resourcefulness in their female protagonists, which to some extent affirms the idea put forward by travellers in Southeast Asia, about strong, independent women of Southeast Asia in the early modern period.

Nevertheless, the films discussed in this chapter reflect modern discourses, and in all cases have been directed by male directors (*Muen and Rid* includes a credit for a female scriptwriter, Channipa Chertsoma), who appear to be contesting the patriarchal society of the period they depict, and using the portraits of their women protagonists as a way of highlighting the continuing need to address women's rights in the present. Barbara Watson Andaya, making an intervention into the debate about the status and independence of the Southeast Asian woman remarks that:

> The standard accounts of Southeast Asia rarely permit females more than a minor historical role. This absence occurs despite a succession of commentators who, over many centuries and with varying degrees of censure or approbation, have remarked on the independence displayed by "Southeast Asian" women.[237]

Nevertheless the work of these three historical films, made in the last thirty years, constructs a shadow historical memory of a different kind of Southeast Asian women (and this was also surely the aim of the author, Mangunwijaya, of the novel *Roro Mendut*). This construct of a different Southeast Asian woman shifts from the norm of the male/patriarchal gaze directed at women in film (as suggested by Laura Mulvey) and reflects a possibly more positive position of women within Southeast Asian history. Thus, the discussion within this chapter utilises some of the main arguments of Western feminist film theory while raising the question of their relevance and explanatory power in relation to the portraits of women provided in these three Southeast Asian films dealing with the early modern period.

Women in Film: Perspectives of Western Feminist Film Theorists

Feminist film theorist Barbara Creed, in an article published in 2004, explores and summarizes the development of feminism and feminist film theory, beginning from the early 1970s, and argues that feminist film theory has more recently

[237] Andaya, "Introduction." *The Flaming Womb* 1.

"influenced the way women and men are portrayed in film."[238] Creed affirms that the initial important work in feminist writing on the cinema is to be found in the works of Marjorie Rosen, Joan Mellen and Molly Haskell who addressed the stereotyped image and conventional roles of women in film. They discovered that the male dominated cinema up to the early 1970s had failed to represent 'woman as woman' and that "men represented women according to their own desires and in terms of male stereotypes about women such as virgin or whore."[239] As a result, films in general, placed women in positions of inferiority as women were overlooked as to the possibility of being anything more than male stereotypes.

The discussion of male stereotypes of women however is criticised by psychoanalytic theorist Claire Johnston. Johnston presents two arguments with regards to the limitations of what she regards as the sociological approach taken by Haskell and others. First, Johnston believes that the approach does "not question the operation of patriarchal myth in the cinema and the way that realism was used to perpetuate such myths."[240] And secondly, the fact that film narratives repeatedly represent women as objects of desire is not given appropriate consideration by these early writers. The question of patriarchal myth and the representation of women in film are directly raised when Johnston claims that "images of women in film were constructed to perpetuate phallocentric myths about women (woman as dangerous femme fatale, woman as happy wife and mother) and that the image of 'woman as

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[238] Creed, Barbara. "Feminist Film Theory: History and Debates." *Pandora's Box: Essays in Film Theory*. Melbourne: Australian Centre for the Moving Image with the Cinema Studies Program, University of Melbourne, 2004. 1.

[239] Creed, *Pandora's Box* 1–3.

[240] Creed, *Pandora's Box* 3.

woman' did not exist."[241] Johnston elaborates on how women are restricted to traditional roles within most societies, as a result of patriarchal ideology:

> The patriarchal ideology works to perpetuate the notion that the destiny of woman is intimately bound up with her sexuality – woman as wife, mother, mistress, prostitute, femme fatale, spinster, sexual tease, (unfulfilled) career woman – and that woman is, by her very *nature*, not suited to playing a major role in the so-called man's world of politics, economics, law, science, technology and the arts. Her primary and 'natural' role is that of wife and mother. Furthermore, patriarchal ideology implies that the woman's role – and hence, woman – is of secondary importance to man's role.[242]

As a result, women are generally depicted as inferior in terms of intelligence, ability, strength and skills. The popular narratives within films too perpetuate negative notions about women. As pointed out by feminist film theorist Christine Gledhill, in most films "women do not speak in their own voice, and are represented only in terms of male discourse about women."[243] This point is pertinent to the films discussed in this chapter which, despite the positive portraits of the resourceful women they represent, are all films produced and directed by men. However, the depictions of the female protagonists within the films reveal a 'sympathetic' gesture by a group of men as they attempt to make women's voices heard.

Laura Mulvey's 1975 seminal article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* develops beyond Johnston's work by giving both a structural and a psychoanalytic

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[241] Creed, *Pandora's Box* 3.

[242] Creed, *Pandora's Box* 10.

[243] Creed, *Pandora's Box* 4-8.

account of the representation of women in much Hollywood cinema. In her article, Mulvey focuses on the relationship between the text and the spectator, emphasising the perception of the 'male gaze'. Basing her arguments on Freud's theories of the Oedipus complex and castration, and Lacan's theory of the Imaginary and Symbolic, Mulvey claims that it is almost always the male protagonist who controls relations of looking in the film. And while the male protagonist signifies the look, woman functions as the 'image', and man as bearer of the look.[244] Mulvey's account of the male gaze in cinema has been very influential, also very productive for film theory. Nevertheless one of my aims in this chapter is to argue that Mulvey's analysis and even the discussion of stereotyping by Haskell and others are not fully confirmed by what we find in these Asian historical films about women in the early modern era. I suggest that the female protagonists within the films exemplify individual characteristics of defying male patriarchy and the patriarchal myth. In addition, the position and image of women in the Southeast Asian historical films within this chapter differ from that conceptualised by these Western/Hollywood feminist film theorists, providing more positive examples of the representation of women in films.

The following question nevertheless arises – how are Southeast Asian women viewed within the context of their social and cultural positions? The discussion within this chapter hence outlines some accounts of Southeast Asian women given at different times in history and in recent years. These accounts are summaries by Southeast Asian historians and anthropologists, accounts which have sufficiently often diverged from the view of the position of women in Europe and elsewhere. In addition, these accounts have become a major source of inspiration for debate not

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[244] Creed, *Pandora's Box* 5.

only among historians and anthropologists, but particularly among feminist anthropologists working on Southeast Asia. And it is also from these perceptions that the more positive position of women within the early modern period is presented.

The Position of Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia

In 1944 French scholar George Coedes argued in his book *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* that Southeast Asian women in earlier periods had a comparatively ‘high status’ within their societies, compared with women in Europe at similar times.[245] Nearly fifty years later, Anthony Reid expresses his support for Coedes’ claim when he states that some women in early modern Southeast Asia had a relatively high degree of economic autonomy, different from that found in Europe at the time.[246] Reid in a lengthy chapter cites numerous accounts given, particularly by travellers from Europe in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, testifying to the unusual status of *some* women in Southeast Asia. There is now an accepted qualification to this view. As historian Barbara Watson Andaya states, with the spread of newly arriving religions (Islam and Christianity), with the advent of Western colonialism, the growth of nationalist movements and the effects of the male dominated struggle against colonisation in the region, the definition of what constituted ‘good’ national history excluded, and largely continues to exclude and marginalise women. Andaya believes that this is due to “history’s concentration on issues such as inter-state diplomacy, political leadership and warfare where men play

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[245] Andaya, *Other Pasts* 1. George Coedes was the director of *Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient* (trans. French School of the Far East) and published his *Histoire ancienne des etats hindouises d’Extreme-Orient* (trans. The Indianized States of Southeast Asia (1968, 1975)).

[246] Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680. Vol. I* 162.

the dominant role and where the written sources privilege male activities."[247]

In addition, Scott and Enloe stress that "when the national story is presented according to accepted formulae, 'women' can only be included as a supplement, especially when nationalist movements and the struggle against colonialism or western influences have been infused by masculine pride."[248] Thus, while initially Southeast Asian women played an influential role in trade, diplomacy, warfare, entertainment, literature, statecraft and trade, the influence of economic, religious and political changes within the region caused them to undergo a transition from a strong, high profile status to one that was marginalized, supplemented and inferior. Reid however explains, "Relations between the sexes are one of the areas in which a distinctive Southeast Asian pattern exists with a relatively high female autonomy and economic importance though their functions from men differed."[249] Reid contrasts the autonomy of women in Southeast Asia and their economic advantages, in this early modern feudal period with their relatively disadvantaged position in the highly patriarchal cultures of India and China, as well as with their position under Islam in the Middle East at the time. It should be mentioned that the perceptions of Southeast Asian women noted by travellers and discussed by Reid, are primarily perceptions about trading women in towns and about women with aristocratic connections, rather than about village women.

Aside from Reid and Andaya, Peter Carey and Vincent Houben also provide

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[247] Andaya, *Other Pasts* 2.

[248] Andaya, *Other Pasts* 2. Andaya refers to: Scott, Joan. "Women's History." *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Ed. Peter Burke. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992. 49. Enloe, Cynthia. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. 64.

[249] Reid, *Modern Asian Studies* 629.

further evidence, from another context, for the high status accorded to some Southeast Asian women. Carey and Houben's account mainly focuses on the social, political and economic role of women in Central Javanese courts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At the centre of these courts were women with powerful personalities who were wealthy heiresses in their own right.[250] In addition, there were also women soldiers of high status who formed a protective guard for the Sultan of Yogyakarta. To a certain extent the roles women played within these Javanese courts, as described by Carey and Houben, are quite similar to the role of women in Thai courts of the fifteenth century. The film *The Legend of Suriyothai* shows women female warriors at Ayutthaya defending nobles of the state.

The roles available to women in Southeast Asia however took a social and historical downturn as a result of three factors: the increasing strength of patriarchal Islam as it moved into Southeast Asia in the late fifteenth century onwards; the beginnings of Western colonialism; and the emergence of male dominated anti-colonial movements. Nevertheless, female protagonists in recent historical films of nations such as Thailand and Indonesia provide a return, in some sense, to this image of the strong and resourceful woman. The actions of these women as historical agents forward the narrative within the film, even when the societies in which they live and act are presented as highly patriarchal. Indeed, the roles that these women play, in at least two of the films discussed in this chapter, provide counter-examples to the position of women in Hollywood cinema as theorised by Mulvey in 1975.

[250] Carey, Peter and Houben, Peter. "Spirited Srikandhis and Sly Sumbadras: The Social, Political and Economic Role of Women at the Central Javanese Courts in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries." *Indonesia Women in Focus: Past and Present Notions*. Eds. Locher-Sholten and Anke Niehof. Holland: Foris Publications, 1987. 12.

Furthermore, the strengths of these women arise from their ingenuity in overcoming overwhelming challenges during the turbulent, changing years of Southeast Asian history. This will be explored in detail in the following discussion of the representation of women within the Thai and Indonesian historical films set in early modern eras.

Women in the Chronicle: *The Legend of Suriyothai* (2001)

One film that explores the role of the exemplary woman is the Thai film *The Legend of Suriyothai*. Directed by Chatri Chalerm Yukol, the film depicts the life of Princess, and later, Queen, Suriyothai who at the end of this lengthy film sacrifices her life in order to protect her husband during battle. As Anchalee Chaiworaporn and Adam Knee point out, the film "focuses on the heroism of a queen who selflessly supports her husband's rise to power and eventually gives her life in fighting (once more) the Burmese."[251] In the film's portrait of Queen Suriyothai, the film presents a central protagonist with some similarities to Gandhi and Sardar Patel, though playing a much more minor historical role. While Suriyothai is depicted as a self-sacrificing protagonist, she is also presented as a strategist, diplomat, and as waiting upon opportunities provided by history. Also her actions are seen as motivated by her sense of responsibility towards her nation. The film concentrates on Suriyothai's experiences as she bears witness to the turbulent political changes within the Ayutthaya Kingdom of fifteenth century Siam. Suriyothai's efforts to protect her

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[251] Anchalee Chaiworaporn and Adam Knee. "Thailand: Revival in an Age of Globalization." Ed. Anne Tereska Ciecko. *Contemporary Asian Cinema*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006. 63.

husband, the future king, from both internal and external enemies of the state, establish her as a defender of the sovereignty of the royal throne.

The Thai 'legend' of Queen Suriyothai, who dies as she attempts to save her husband, King Maha Chakkraphat (1548-1569) from Burmese invaders, is told as part of the curriculum for schoolchildren in Thailand, with specially written textbooks celebrating her bravery. Her sacrifice in saving her husband during battle is considered exemplary. However, precise historical references to Suriyothai are few. Details of Suriyothai herself are limited to a number of historical sources such as the translated version of *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*,[252] and in interpretations found in David K. Wyatt's *Thailand: a Short History.*[253] Recently one scholar has questioned the veracity of even these sources, pointing out that the first chronicle that mentions Suriyothai by name was written 247 years after her death, though there is a mention of a heroic Thai queen dying in battle, in a chronicle written 114 years after her death.[254] Despite the limited information about Suriyothai's life, the director of *The Legend of Suriyothai*, [Prince] Chatri Chalerm Yukol was inspired to produce and retell Suriyothai's story, at the same time addressing the challenge of recreating the golden era of the Ayutthaya Kingdom of the fifteenth century, with its lavish and extensive palaces and its large array of military forces.

The Thai version of the film was completed in 2000. As a member of the Thai Royal family and a great-grandson of the reforming king, Rama V (also known as King Chulalongkorn), Chatri obtained substantial financial backing from the

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[252] Cushman, Richard D. (synoptic translation). "Book Two: The King of the White Elephants." *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*. Ed. David K. Wyatt. 2000. 32, 34, 40.

[253] Wyatt, "Ayutthaya and Its Neighbors, 1351 – 1569." *Thailand: a Short History* 78, 80.

[254] Amporn Jirattikorn, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 299.

present Queen of Thailand, Queen Sirikit Phra Borommarachininat. The Queen's support was provided in the hope that Thais would learn more about their history, from the film, particularly about this exemplary queen of Ayutthaya. Later, financial and creative support for an international version of the film came from American director-producer, Francis Ford Coppola. At the time of its production the film was the most ambitious and expensive film ever made in Thailand, with an estimated cost of USD$9 million, five years of research and two and half years of production. The film was considered a first of its kind in the creation of a national epic.[255] For most of Chatri's career he had established a reputation for himself as a director making pertinent and provocative melodramas and crime films that in a comparatively radical way addressed social problems in contemporary Thailand. It is only late in his career that he has begun to make historical films.

Set in the early Ayutthaya period, the film *The Legend of Suriyothai* begins in 1428 and chronicles the history of the Thai court, with its numerous coups, counter coups, murders, and changes of regime over a twenty year period. As in a chronicle, a succession of events is presented neutrally, almost ironically distanced, without the narrative strongly identifying with or justifying the actions of any of the individuals who take part in the various bloody struggles for power. According to Wyatt, most of the Thai chronicles were lists, often undated, of kings, or collections of legends. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries these took the form of annals of state, replete

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[255] Amporn Jirattikorn, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 296. This fact is true at the time of writing the thesis.

with detailed accounts of religious events and wars, of dynastic conflicts and popular movements.[256] Wyatt comments on this period thus:

> The mixture of forces and interests that combined to Ayutthaya's strength through the first centuries of its existence is revealed in the vicissitudes of its internal politics, the fluctuations of its foreign policy, and the form taken by its institutions. In each of these areas are revealed tensions and a potential for conflict that can have been eased and directed only by creative and forceful leadership.[257]

Based on a number of references, Wyatt deduces that the Kingdom of Ayutthaya was set up in 1351. The political conflicts in Ayutthaya centred on the succession to the throne, which passed back and forth between the Suphanburi and Lopburi houses for several generations.[258]

The following table summarises major succession crises that occurred beginning in 1369 with the death of Ramathibodi I, founder of Ayutthaya, and summarises the political conflicts in the kingdom:

Table 7: Chronicled Political Conflict around the Throne of Ayutthaya[259]

Year	Ruler/Event	Successor / Usurper
1351	Ayutthaya is founded by Ramathibodi	
1369	Ramathibodi I dies	Ramesuan, his son
1370	Ramesuan	Borommaracha, Ramesuan's uncle usurps the throne
1388	Borommaracha dies	Thong Chan, son, 17 years old takes the throne
	Thong Chan, executed	Ramesuan, usurps the throne
1395	Ramesuan dies	Ramaracha, son, takes the throne

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[256] Wyatt, "A Tai Century, 1219-1350." *Thailand: a Short History* 31.

[257] Wyatt, *Thailand: a Short History*. 55.

[258] Wyatt, *Thailand: a Short History*. 54, 56.

[259] Wyatt, *Thailand: a Short History*. 54-82. 312.

1409	Ramaracha goes into exile	Nakhon In, or, Intharacha, younger brother of Thong Chan, ascends the throne.
1424	Intharacha dies	Borommaracha II (r.1424-1448) claims the throne after the deaths of his two elder brothers during a contested battle for the throne.
1448-1463	Borommatrailokanat	Borommaracha II son, Ramesuan succeeds the thrown and takes the name Borommatrailokanat (or King Trailok)
1463	Borommaracha III (r.1463-1488)/Intharacha II (r. 1488-91)	Ayutthaya prospered under the rule of Borommaracha III/Intharacha II and
1491	Ramathibodi II (r. 1491-1529)	Ramathibodi II
1529	Ramathibodi II dies	Borommaracha IV (r. 1529-1533) ascends the throne.
1533	Borommaracha IV dies of smallpox	Ratsada (r.1533-1534, 5 months), five years old, ascends the throne.
1534	Ratsada, held the throne for five months, and later put to death	Chairacha (r. 1534-1547), Borommaracha IV's half-brother, ascends the throne.
1547	Chairacha dies.	Yot Fa (r.1547-1548), 11 years old ascends the throne, his mother, Si Sudachan, acting regent.
1548	Yot Fa is poisoned.	Khun Worawongsa (1548), Si Sudachan's lover takes the throne.
	Late July 1548, Khun Worawongsa is overthrown after six weeks	Thianracha, or Chakkraphat (r. 1548-1569), Chairacha's brother, takes over the throne. Thianracha is also Suriyothai's husband
1569	The fall of Ayutthaya	

The film, while chronicling the political turmoil of Ayutthaya, centres on Suriyothai, the leading protagonist of the film, as an observer, as she witnesses unfolding events within Ayutthaya. Throughout the film Suriyothai remains marginal to many of the power struggles she sees over the twenty years, but gains in authority through her quiet persistence and resolution, as she is devotedly loyal to her husband and often acts as his advisor. As such, the film details the chronicled events from history as it also attempts to fill in the gaps that history is unable to provide. It explores history through the perspective of a young queen as actual names, dates and acts of political reign and power struggles within the Kingdom of Ayutthaya of the fifteenth century are revealed throughout the film.

The first sixteen minutes of the film establishes Suriyothai as a happy and adventurous young woman, one who resents being tied down by rules. This is much to the disapproval of her guardians, who believe that her carefree nature is unfit for a person of royal birth. Suriyothai is determined to experience life to its fullest and her confidence and independent nature, partly the result of her higher position in life, is compared to the demeanours of her meeker ladies-in-waiting. However, while Suriyothai is independent and confident, as a princess she finally succumbs to the responsibilities of her birth and consents to marrying the son of the second King Ramathibodi II, Prince Thein, in efforts to ensure the peace between Ayutthaya and the region of Pitsanulok.

Being a princess, Suriyothai is born into a privileged and noble family of wealth and power. Her high position in society itself ensures that she does not face hardships such as those endured by the peasantry. Her nobility allows her a freedom that while limited, very much moulds the manner in which she views life and the political events around her. Being a witness to political developments is an experience that will later facilitate her sure sense of judgement as future queen, and her capacity for strategic thinking. Suriyothai's agency arises from her strategic thinking about her nation as she ensures the safety of her country, husband and her people, during the numerous coups that break out throughout a period of thirty years. Nevertheless Suriyothai must compromise and make sacrifices frequently in the course of her life. Suriyothai's first sacrifice, as suggested in the film, is when she conforms to an arranged marriage, out of a sense of responsibility for maintaining the peace within the nation. At this point Suriyothai sacrifices her love for another man.

As indicated by Carey and Houben, many princesses of these earlier periods were married off as a means of ensuring strong ties with allies of the nation.[260] Hence, Suriyothai's sacrifice of her love in order to fulfil her obligations to her nation is an expected act that she must endure as a royal duty. Suriyothai's willing sacrifice for the nation also establishes the manner in which she handles unfolding events of the future. As time passes, Suriyothai grows into womanhood and falls into the conventional role of wife and mother with a family of her own. However, as political change and numerous power struggles befall Ayutthaya, Suriyothai who plays less of a role in the diegesis of the film during this time, continues to pay close attention to unfolding events that threaten or harm her husband's security as heir to the thrown. Suriyothai retains a link to the narrative of the film, for while coups take place in the main palace, the states advisors seek her and her husband's council.

Anchalee and Knee believe that *The Legend of Suriyothai* "celebrates key historical battles and real or legendary personages as constitutive of the Thai nation, both geopolitically and in spirit."[261] This is very much a reflection of the proposed intentions of its royal producer and director, in that the film highlights major historical battles such as the wars against the Burmese, as well as internal coups by various members of different fractions within the royal family. The fact that the film also contains 'real or legendary' characters indicates a certain 'artistic license' in the

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[260] Carey and Houben, *Indonesian Women in Focus* 25. "Although the role of women in ceremonial, military and financial affairs was of vital importance…their principal functions were dynastic and procreative ones. Thus they served as the vital links between the ruler and other powerful families in the realm, binding the court in an intimate relationship…through innumerable family ties." While Carey and Houben describe the practices of the Javanese courts, similarities to practices within nations of the region such as Thailand provide insight into the position of noble women of the feudal period.

[261] Anchalee and Knee, *Contemporary Asian Cinema* 63.

way the director addresses the issue of how to draw out its chronicled history. And because the film itself involved funding from the royal family, a major objective of the film would overall have been ultimately to cast the monarchy in a positive light.

For this reason, while the film focuses on Suriyothai's heroism, it also models patriotism as a strong characteristic of Thai womanhood. Suriyothai's sacrifice for her nation categorises her as a woman of exceptional character and presents her as someone of good standing, who is also trustworthy and intelligent. The grandeur in which the film is set exemplifies the extravagant wealth and power of Ayutthaya that surrounds Suriyothai throughout her growing up years. This wealth, however, does not define her character, as she is depicted as courageous and noble in her actions and opinions, especially when confronted by an adversary. Suriyothai as the film's historical agent is established as a rebellious and independent young woman as she refuses to comply with the limitations of social conduct. However, her willingness to sacrifice her own dreams and desires for the Kingdom of Ayutthaya sets her as a 'martyr' in the eyes of the people (and ultimately in the eyes of the audience), and her final sacrifice in protecting her husband the King seals her position in history as both a legendary and an exemplary figure.

Suriyothai returns to the screen in the final twenty minutes of the film as she plays a key role in saving her husband from a coup instigated by Lady Srisudachan (the lover to King Khun Worawongsa, 1548), and Suriyothai continues to defend her husband as the rightful ruler of Ayutthaya in the final battle against the Burmese army. Suriyothai's self sacrificing death is narrated at the end of the film, emphasising her legendary status and sacrifice for the nation. Thus, while the film

unveils the life of the female protagonist, the historical chronicles dominate the progression of the film itself, causing Suriyothai to remain on the edge of the film as a historical agent that binds the film together. As Suriyothai's demeanour throughout the film demonstrates her brave and noble characteristics, the film successfully presents a dignified presence that establishes the sanctity of Royal Thai women and the royal family.

History in the film *The Legend of Suriyothai* is inscribed through the chronicled events of the period leading up to the climax of the film and the main agent's sacrificing death. The use of specific dates identifies recorded historical events, though the names and figures of most characters within the film are the material of legend rather than established historical fact. Because the film concentrates on the causal chain of the external events it is chronicling, it does tend to lose focus on Suriyothai's political and personal interactions, but ultimately, her cultural importance is what makes the film distinctive.[262] Undoubtedly the film's chronicles depict the patriarchal power of the feudal era on the lives of these women. While trapped in the bounds of rules and royalty, these women develop their own personalities by not merely complying with the demands placed upon them, but also ensuring that decisions are made in the best interest of the nation. Though there may be those who disagree, such as that Thongchai, who argues that:

> The story of *Suriyothai* was written in order to present the ideal woman possessed by the Great King of Ayutthaya, and it is therefore not the story of

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[262] Anchalee and Knee, *Contemporary Asian Cinema* 70.

a heroine, but of an ideal wife.[263]

I would however to some extent disagree with this perspective, as *Suriyothai's* agency of self-sacrifice for the nation is the defining element of the film because everything she does is for king and country. I would suggest that this notion of sacrifice for the nation is much influenced by how the current royal family wants to portray itself within history of the nation. Even though the earlier kingdom was riddled with civil wars and coups, the royal lineage is given precedence and raised as the ultimate power of the country, a lineage that the film's producer hopes will continue to be respected by its people.

An important article on this film, written from a Cultural Studies perspective by Amporn Jirattikorn, argues that the film is an example of what Hobsbawm and Ranger describe as the 'reinvention of tradition'. This is particularly so, given that so little is known about the historical Suriyothai, that to tell a story about her at all involves a great deal of supposition and invention. The article claims that this reinvention of tradition, this celebration of 'Thainess', was almost certainly stimulated by the threats to Thai identity and loss of international prestige at the time of the Southeast Asian economic crisis that commenced in December 1997. The article does not really explore the film itself in detail, but concentrates on its context of production. It points out that despite the way in which the film celebrated 'Thainess', its director went to great lengths to bring in foreign artists to work on the film, notably its European cinematographer, and its English composer, in the hope of achieving a technical quality that might give the film a chance of receiving an

[263] Amporn Jirratikorn, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 303.

Academy Award, and that this reduced the cultural specificity, the 'Thainess' of the film. While the article establishes its claim that the involvement of the Thai queen as funder and sponsor of the film clearly made it very much a nationalist and royalist project, it fails to establish that the director made the project in response to the financial crisis of late 1997. Jirattikorn cites the film's director, Chatri Chalerm Yukol, to the effect that overall he spent five years on the project, including several years of research before the shooting began. Since the film was released in August 2001, then Chatri would have commenced the project at least a year and possibly eighteen months prior to the financial crisis hitting Thailand in 1997.

Sensuality and Alternative History in Folktale: Indonesia's *Roro Mendut* (1983)

While the earlier discussion of *The Legend of Suriyothai* focused on the position of a woman of noble birth within Thai history, the following discussion of the film *Roro Mendut* explores the position of a woman also of noble birth, and from the coastal area of Northern Java, who becomes a captive of war. The film narrates the unusual measures she takes to counter and attempt to overcome a difficult situation, where she is expected to become one of the mistresses of her captor, a powerful general of the Central Javanese Mataram court. The Indonesian historical film *Roro Mendut* was directed by Moscow trained, Indonesian director, Ami Priyono, and was based on a well known Javanese folktale, which even in recent years has been retold in a number of forms, as kethoprak drama and as a lengthy novel. Ami Priyono was the son of the first Minister of Education in the Sukarno government in the early years of Indonesian independence, and throughout his life

retained connections with educated, progressive and liberal circles in Jakarta. Until his death in 2002, his partner was one of Indonesia's leading feminist writers, Julia Suryakusuma. The making of the film was inspired by the publication of the novel *Roro Mendut* by the leading Indonesian novelist, Central Java based social worker (and Jesuit priest), Y. B. Mangunwijaya, who also wrote the screenplay for the film. The story and the film are very much influenced by stories from the popular central Javanese kethoprak theatre, "a simple folk play performed in villages in the vicinity of the central Javanese court cities of Yogya and Solo."[264]

Initially a simple folk play, kethoprak, according to Barbara Hatley, soon became influenced by classical court drama and by western-style commercial theatre. Hatley explains that the kethoprak consisted of stories of historical Javanese kingdoms, and was considered an expression of Indonesian nationalist pride and a celebration of local cultural tradition.[265] The kethoprak retains its folk identity in both its performance content and the social background of its participants, as scenes depicting encounters between funny farming folk and nobles are performed. The kethoprak often satirises the upper classes but its leading protagonists regularly are played as aristocrats. The idea of different audiences and different class relations are also emphasised in the kethoprak as the audience is often drawn from the ranks of *wong cilik*, 'the little people', who consist of small farmers and farm labourers, petty traders and urban workers.[266] According to Hatley, evidence of the legendary tale derives from texts produced in royal courts, as the centres of literary activity.

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[264] Hatley, *Histories and Stories* 15.

[265] Hatley, *Histories and Stories* 15.

[266] Hatley, *Histories and Stories* 16.

Versions of the tale were thought to have been transmitted orally among ordinary people, leaving no record. At the same time, some of these courtly writings made specific mention of their inspiration in a pre-existing oral tradition. Hatley believes that:

> The author of the text published by Balai Pustaka in 1920 and translated into Dutch by C.C. Berg claims, for example, to have transcribed the story from the words of a wandering troubadour who recited the tale to village audiences. Many features of these works confirm a sense of folk connection – lively, realistic presentation of the story, straightforward rather than flowery, literary language and the inclusion of scenes of everyday village life.[267]

The story of Roro Mendut is often compared to the tale of Romeo and Juliet, as the legendary nature of the tale not only derives from its tragedy, with the death of Mendut and her lover at the end, but also in the ingenuity of Mendut's actions.[268] But in fact the Roro Mendut story is very different from Shakespeare's play, even in plot, and contains many elements that are culturally specific to Java.

In the first phase of the film, Mendut is introduced as a Northern coastal noble woman who is captured in a regional war and taken to Central Java. There, she is destined to become one of the mistresses of the general who captured her, Wiraguno. Roro Mendut is an engaging and skilled dancer and it is her skill at dancing, shown early in the film, that attracts General Wiraguno's attention. Through elements of sensual dance, Mendut tempts yet thwarts Wiraguno and his advances. In an attempt to avoid his demand that she submit to his desires and becomes his

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[267] Hatley, *Histories and Stories* 15.

[268] Hatley, *Histories and Stories* 14.

mistress, she agrees to pay a tax to him. How she does this is the unique core of the story and of the film. Secretly and in disguise she goes to villages, and sets up a tent from within which she sells *kretek* cigarettes, moistened with her saliva, to village men. She advertises the moistening component by appearing in a cinema like shadow-profile in an opening in the tent. The ingenious Roro Mendut thus uses her sensuality as a means of controlling her predicament, without jeopardising her honour. Some of the implications of this unique story will be explored further below, particularly the elements of sensuality.

Here I will briefly address the question as to how this film, set in an earlier period in Java, might be seen as making a comment on the present. While the film was not openly viewed as allegorical at the time of its release in Suharto's New Order Indonesia in 1983, its story of resistance (in Mendut's character) to a Central Javanese general is in keeping with the spirit of kethoprak drama, for General Wiraguno, both in legend and in the film, comes from and is a representative of Central Java, the birthplace of President Suharto. Hatley has explored ways in which these kinds of tales can be seen as providing a means by which the population can express in covert ways, resistance to authority.[269]

Mendut's utilisation of her sensuality may be seen as a deliberate appeal to a certain male way of thinking. Barbara Creed's observations about how patriarchal ideology can determine ways in which men view women is relevant here:

> Perhaps the most significant and interesting aspect of patriarchal ideology is the way in which it represents woman in terms of her sexuality and reduces

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[269] Hatley, *Histories and Stories* 17, 20.

> her to her body and her (male-defined) sexual desires. Within the context of patriarchal ideology, woman exists outside civilisation, language and the Law; she is located in the realm of 'nature' – woman as 'other', the sphinx, and the eternal enigma.[270]

In this article Creed's argues that much of Hollywood popular narrative film signifies patriarchal ideology, which works to perpetuate these notions about woman through the way in which it constructs the categories of sexual difference. The woman is constructed as 'other' in film fundamentally by virtue of her sexuality. As Janey Place states, the "centrality of sexuality in this definition is a key to understanding the position of women in our culture" and provides a key to understanding the working of patriarchal ideology in relation to the construction of sexual differences.[271] Nevertheless, as Creed concludes, "the deviant heroine is not necessarily one whose sexuality is in excess, she is one who has failed to conform to the acceptable female role. Her deviance is linked to the notion of what constitutes the acceptable social/sexual/emotional female role."[272] Therefore, in this instance, I argue that while Roro Mendut exudes sensuality/sexuality in her actions, her intent/purpose/goal is not considered to be sensual in a self gratifying way, but rather is to be regarded as an ingenious means of overcoming difficult obstacles, but manifesting also a sophisticated understanding of men and of sexual desire.

Elements of sensuality are a recurrent theme in two of the women's historical films discussed in this chapter. It functions as a means by which the central female

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[270] Creed, *Pandora's Box* 10.

[271] Creed, *Pandora's Box* 11.

[272] Creed, *Pandora's Box* 12.

protagonists may or may not have social power, and unconsciously or ingeniously exert their sensuality as a means of ensuring their survival. Aside from *Roro Mendut* the other film, which will be discussed next, is another Thai film, *Muen and Rid* (Cherd Songsri, Thailand, 1983). Both films display a unique manner in which sensuality functions either as a tool for the women to control events as well as the men around them, or as an unconsciously present element of charisma and power which in some way acts to their advantage. The manner in which this sensuality is constructed and evaluated in these two historical films differs from that outlined by Mulvey and Creed with regards to the male gaze and the patriarchal myth that they discuss, as the women do not fully conform to the earlier mentioned stereotypes.

The film *Roro Mendut* can be divided into four phases, based on the actions of Mendut as the female protagonist. As we have seen, the first phase depicts Mendut's capture by General Wiraguno and establishes her position as a prisoner of war. The second phase shows her acts of defiance, through dance and the selling of kreteks cigarettes, as a means of defying the unwarranted attention of the general. The third phase of the film depicts Mendut's new found love for Pronocitro, a visiting warrior who is aware of her activities in selling the cigarettes, and, catching a glimpse of her as she leaves a village to return to the court, is intrigued by her. In the final part of the film, Mendut flees the court with Pronocitro, but she is pursued by Wiraguno and his forces. When Pronocitro is slain by Wiraguno, Roro Mendut seizes a *keris*, a small dagger, and takes her own life. In contrast to the chronicle form found in *The Legend of Suriyothai*, the film, in its brief but expressive use of voice-over narration, establishes in its opening scenes a feeling of a folk legend from history that is being retold, as Wiraguno, on behalf of the Sultan of Mataram, attacks

a coastal town, captures it, and is later rewarded with the right to keep one of his captives, the beautiful Mendut.

Mendut's attraction is not only her beauty but also her spirited and sensual nature which draws Wiraguno's attention and desire. This element of sensuality is demonstrated early in the film when Mendut is forced to dance in front of Wiraguno, his wives and the men of the *kraton* or court. As the traditional music plays, Mendut's sensual movement begins with the gentle curve of her fingers and her arms as she swirls them from side to side, calling to her audience and drawing them in. As the audience, who are mostly men, become captivated, the pace of the music increases. The rhythm of Mendut's dance also increases as she sensually tilts her head and stretches her neck. As the tempo of the music increases, Mendut further entices her audience with the fast paced shake of her upper torso and rapid sway of her hips. This drives the men into an excited frenzy as howls and shouts ring across the room and the men become rowdy. At this point the film cuts to reveal the audience's reception: while the men are excited, the women look seemingly disgusted.

This scene denotes Mendut's presentation to the court audience (and ultimately to the film audience) as a sensual spectacle. However, the film is not so much exploiting a spectacle, as exploring it. The film repeatedly cuts from Mendut dancing, to shots of Wiraguno's gaze as he watches her and becomes increasingly entranced. Here, the audience is not so much identified with Wiraguno and his look, but rather observes his captivation with Mendut. It is Wiraguno's look that becomes objectified and investigated, rather than Mendut as spectacle.

This first demonstration of sensual behaviour, which occurs in the second phase of the film, causes Mendut to become the talk of the court, and results in Wiraguno becoming obsessed with her. Mendut remains resistant to Wiraguno's demands, which forces Wiraguno to place upon Mendut a daily tax, with the condition that she is not allowed to reveal herself to public view in order to gain the necessary funds. Placed in this predicament, Mendut rationally strategizes and makes plans. With the help of her ladies-in-waiting, Mendut begins to sell moistened kreteks at the village market. Hidden within an enclosed tent with a screen at its entrance, her profiled shadow reflects her act of moistening the cigarettes – almost an allegory of the cinema itself. Similarly to her court dance, Mendut's actions soon draw the frenzied attention of the men in the village, as they watch her shadow erotically moisten the cigarettes with her saliva. This scene explores men's erotic imaginings as created by the screen, offering the men of the audience a safe indulgence of their fantasies and desires.

The film hence investigates, in a sophisticated way, ideas of how erotic behaviour might for a while become a means of controlling men. Mendut manages to utilise her sensuality and control the men to her advantage, without compromising her individuality. The sensual way in which she becomes financially independent is in the creative manner she explores and exploits men's fantasies and desires. Quite symbolically, the men's frenzy stirred by Mendut's kretek making skills results in an allegorical scene of a cockfight that gets out of control, and reflects the nature of the men around her, who fight for her attention and favours. And to a certain extent the film delights in the idea of sensuality as a means of producing social disorder. At the climax to this scene the crowd gets rowdy and aggressive. Demanding Mendut's

kreteks they storm her tent and in their frenzy try to grab her, bringing Mendut's sensual adventures to an abrupt end, but not before she is able to prove that she can to survive on her own. Here the film has satirized the excesses of male desire.

It is within this frenzy at the market that she is rescued by Pronocitro and a 'love-at-first' sight moment takes place, marking the third phase of the film. Mendut sees Pronocitro as a means of escaping her captivity, though she does not employ any sensual 'moves' on Pronocitro. Rather their relationship begins as they become mutually entranced with one another. Rather than fleeing immediately with Pronocitro, Roro Mendut chooses to return to save her friends who are still held captive. Up to this point in the film, while Mendut has used her understanding of both sexuality and sensuality (the sensuality of the cigarettes), her actions have been rational, a deliberated means of challenging Wiraguno, and seeking to remain free of him. However, this phase of the film comes to an end with Mendut escaping and running away with Pronocitro, as Wiraguno gives chase.

The final phase of the film ends with Mendut and Pronocitro on the beach. At this point an element of sensuality is explored, as amidst the crashing waves of the ocean the film shows a momentary physical intimacy between Mendut and Pronocitro. Mendut's happiness, however, is short lived as Wiraguno discovers the two lovers. A fight between Pronocitro and Wiraguno takes place and the story moves towards its tragic end as Wiraguno successfully stabs Pronocitro with his keris. Witnessing Pronocitro's death, a devastated Mendut grabs the keris and kills herself. Just as in Romeo and Juliet, the two lovers die.

In keeping close to the story's origins as a folktale, the film does not present an exact date or a historical context, though it is set in an identifiable period, time and place – the seventeenth century Central Javanese Mataram court. Still there is a deliberate vagueness as to where this folktale can be placed in history. No specific dates are given to the unfolding events that take place after the opening voice-over, nor are the characters within the film historically identified. For example, the character of the Mataram general could have been that of any general of the period. And while one may see this film as in a tradition of a legendary folktale, one element that differentiates folktales from that of films with historical reference is that historical films do not contain mystical nor magical elements, and throughout *Roro Mendut* there are no instances of the use of magical powers or flying tricks as a means of overcoming conflict, which could result in the film being termed a fantasy. But I would suggest that what fundamentally distinguishes *Roro Mendut* is not simply the absence of trick effects within the film, but the fact that the film presents a kind of alternate history, not the kind of history recorded in annals such as the exploits of military hero, but a folk history recording an alternative view of the period. It provides a perspective from the point of view of the people and of women.

Roro Mendut is thus a bold film about a woman trying to free herself from the grasp of a powerful and dominant man. As Hatley states, "the characterization of Roro Mendut as a celebration of the image of a strong autonomous woman," illustrate that the film recognises that in certain social circumstances, women can find themselves in similar difficult situations.[273] But the film also develops a particularly unique Javanese scenario of the sensual and it does this with both

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[273] Hatley, *Histories and Stories* 21.

imagination and humour. *Roro Mendut* highlights potentialities within female sensuality and their possible uses. This sensuality, however, is not simply another instance of the male gaze (as explained by Mulvey), but an act whereby the woman uses her sensuality in a variety of ways to resist the controlling male gaze, attempting to control the man as a means of survival. While the story itself portrays the sensuality of the female protagonist, it does not present a degrading portrayal of her character, but reveals the way in which Mendut uses her imagination as well as her sensuality to control the patriarchal system itself.

Ultimately the film is pessimistic, for it shows that within the patriarchal sexual politics of the Mataram court, resistance is only successful for a time, and in the end, the film closes with Mendut's tragic death. As suggested by Krishna Sen, in linking the past and the modern the film, in Mendut's actions of refusing the general, signifies "the regional struggle of Java's coastal periphery against the Central Javanese heartland."[274] However, as suggested by Hatley, Mendut's characteristics of 'assertiveness and defiance', reflects the "understandings of 'modern' feminine behaviour influenced by Western models, and [perhaps] with ideas of individual rights and autonomy for women."[275]

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[274] Sen, Krishna. "Repression and Resistance: Interpretations of the Feminie in New Order Cinema." *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia*. Ed. Virginia Matheson Hooker. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995. 126.

[275] Hatley, *Histories and Stories* 22.

Tales of Spirituality, Sensuality and Eroticism: *Muen and Rid* (1983)

As previously discussed, *Roro Mendut* reworks a folktale set within an historical period to represent an alternative history, or indeed a form of history from below. The Thai film *Amdaeng Muen Kap Nai Rid* (trans. 'Muen and Rid'), set in mid-nineteenth Thailand, on the other hand, presents a more realistically told story of a woman's destiny at a transition point in Thai history. While *The Legend of Suriyothai* depicted the chronicled life of Thai royalty and the women within the courts, *Muen and Rid* revels in the strength of the common Thai woman in its portrait of the peasant woman, Muen, who like Mendut resists the social pressures that would push her to conform to male desires and accept a marriage forced upon her by her father.

In 1868, the Thai King issued a proclamation concerning the sale by families of their daughters, explicitly stating that it was no longer acceptable for women to be treated as objects of merchandise. Historically, prior to these changes, in existing Thai laws (promulgated in 1805), Thai women were subjected to 'unequivocal subjugation,' as Junko Koizumi explains,

> Both Article 81 in the Law of Husbands and Wives and Article 3 in the Law on Slavery in the Three-Seals Law Code, clearly states that a girl should be subject to her parents 'controlling power' prior to marriage, from which point her husband would assume this authority in lieu of her parents. Until the introduction of a modern legal system in the early twentieth century, this Three-Seals Law Code of 1805 served as the basic frame of reference for any

decisions of legal nature taken by the authorities.[276]

As a result of these earlier laws, patriarchal dominance by the father and male figures within the women's lives could result in the women being treated legally as no better than property to be sold and traded.[277] Koizumi's appropriately titled article "From a Water Buffalo to a Human Being: Women and the Family in Siamese History" examines the definition and redefinition of historical conceptions of women and the family in Siam (Thailand) in the post Ayutthaya, early Bangkok period in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Those parts of Koizumi's discussion most relevant to the film *Muen and Rid* are those that focus on the beginnings of a shift in the position of women in Thailand, that commences late in the reign of King Mongkut (1851-1868) [278]

According to Koizumi, in 1865 a woman named Muan petitioned King Mongkut to allow her to elope with her lover.[279] As she was more than twenty years old, the king declared that she had full right to choose her spouse, even if it meant refusing the man her parents had chosen for her. Muan's petition, as mentioned by Koizumi, was followed by another petition by a woman named Amdaeng (Mrs.) Chan, who had been sold into slavery by her husband without her consent. As a result of these grievances, King Mongkut decided that the existing law, which

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[276] Junko Koizumi. "From a Water Buffalo to a Human Being: Women and the Family in Siamese History." *Other Pasts.* Ed. Barbara Watson Andaya. Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawaii Manoa, 2000. 255.

[277] Koizumi, *Other Pasts* 256. The Law of Husbands and Wives and the Three-Seals Law Code recognized mainly three categories of the wife: (1) a wife given to a man by her parents with their full endorsement, (2) a women who became a man's wife at his request and was maintained or "fed" by him as his minor wife, and (3) a "slave" wife, a woman who was in poverty and was "purchased" by the man who supported her.

[278] Koizumi, *Other Pasts* 255.

[279] Koizumi, *Other Pasts* 254. 'Muan,' as spelt in Koizumi's article, will be used sparingly as referenced. For the purpose of this study, the spelling applied by the film, Muen, is used.

allowed husbands and parents to enslave wives and children without their knowledge, was unjust. So in 1868 the king proclaimed a new law by which a wife's consent and her signature in the deed of sale was a prerequisite for any such transaction, and that the stipulation that treats women as water buffalo and men as humans was abolished.[280]

Koizumi perceives that with the abolition of the laws, the king had redefined the relationship between men and women, as well as the conception of family, kinship, and genealogy. Koizumi qualifies these remarks saying that the reforms were in accordance with the King's own ideas, which were to some extent formed by patriarchal and class consciousness.[281] She further explains that the new laws prohibiting the treatment of women as merchandise were particularly designed to protect poorer women in rural areas, who were most likely to be victimised in this way, and that the king was genuinely concerned about the fates of these women. On the other hand some of the reforms accompanying the new laws in certain respects strengthened the power of an upper class father to control his daughter's marriage, in order to strengthen the prestige of aristocratic families, including, Koizumi claims, the prestige of the king's own family.[282]

The film *Muen and Rid* commences in 1861, and was inspired by the historical tale of Amdaeng Muan (Muen in the film) and her petition to the king. At the beginning of the film the youthful Muen is rescued from drowning in a river, after her boat founders during a storm, when she is going about family business. She

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[280] Koizumi, *Other Pasts* 254.

[281] Koizumi, *Other Pasts* 256.

[282] Koizumi, *Other Pasts* 263-264.

is rescued by a young monk, Rid. Sensing the goodness of Rid, and perhaps even their mutual attraction, she sets out to be given permission to study reading and writing at the local monastery, where Rid is her main instructor. Muen begins to grow in knowledge and confidence beyond what is expected of a village girl. Sometime subsequently, she finds that her father is about to sell her into an arranged marriage, having squandered the family fortune in gambling. Muen is advised by her wise grandmother, who also seeks an education at the monastery, but Muen receives little support from her fearful mother. In fact, as Koizumi points out, though this is not shown in the film, even under the Three Seals Law of the early Bangkok period (1805), mothers had a say in determining to whom a daughter might be married.[283] The film does not elaborate on this, partly because it is rare for drama, as opposed to sociology and legal history, to make these fine distinctions. But also it is clear that the film is addressing, sometimes using brutal melodrama to do so, the worst excesses of patriarchal behaviour.

The film addresses Muen's quest for emancipation in a dominating patriarchal society, and explores the conflicting dilemmas faced not just by Muen, but by her initially chaste lover, a monk by the name of Rid. Rid struggles with the conflict he experiences between the demands of Buddhist precepts, which require that a monk has no desires, and the very keen desire he feels for Muen.

It is the woman, Muen, who is at the centre of the film, as she defies traditional Thai culture and conventions by first, gaining an education and later, choosing her own life partner. Muen's pursuit of an education, as presented in the

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[283] Koizumi, *Other Pasts*, 259.

film, allows her to determine her future as, with growing knowledge and confidence she begins to emancipate herself from the control of her father and other potential male figures. This self-preserving trait of defying the patriarchal figure would not have been common among women of the society during this feudal period. Hence, the question arises as to the elements that could have influenced Muen in the decisions that she made. This will be explained in the course of this discussion.

Muen and Rid was directed by Cherd Songsri, one of whose earlier films, *The Scar* (1978), was about a young Thai village woman's experience moving from village to city in the early twentieth century. The film was highly regarded at European film festivals in the early 1980s and by the Japanese critic, Tadao Sato. Cherd is known for his robust and at times exquisite treatment of rural Thailand in a number of films. The script for *Muen and Rid* was co-written by his wife, Channipa Chertsoma. In the opening scene of *Muen and Rid,* Cherd employs numerous symbolic representations of nature and Buddhism in his efforts to establish an authenticity for the film and its relation to Thai cultural specificity. For example the opening credits of *Muen and* Rid initially are presented against a background of an image of a white tusked elephant. This is designed to give the impression that the film is of honourable and righteous intentions, as the elephant is considered a sacred animal in Thai culture and represents 'strength, wisdom and victory'.[284] The film continues with its opening prologue, which consists of a series of inter-titles which outline the historical context of the film, particularly the manner in which Thai women were treated as buffalos (similar to the account given earlier by Koizumi):

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[284] Holtcamp, Wendee. "Beyond Beast of Burden: Elephants in Thai Culture." *Animal Planet.* 2008. http://animal.discovery.com/convergence/safari/elephant/thaielephants/thaielephants1.html. Uploaded: 22 November 2009.

> Before the royal decree of 1865, Thai women were treated as objects of no significant value. Men were legally entitled to pawn or sell their daughters and wives much as they would sell cattle at the market. Hence there was the Thai saying, 'Women are buffalos, men are humans.'[285]

The scene that follows this inter-title opens to powerful orchestral music that is accompanied by the vivid imagery of rolling purplish clouds that begin to form and shape across a darkening sky. As the music builds, the modern orchestral music merges with music from traditional Thai instruments played against the background of gradually changing, rolling and forming clouds as they foreshadow not only the forthcoming changes that are about to take place within the film, but also suggest the merging of two significant elements of the old and the modern. As the pace of the music builds, so does the speed of the moving clouds, until the music reaches a crescendo as the clouds clash together, after which the film cuts from the sky to long reeds on land being forcefully blown by the wind of an approaching storm. Growing splatters of rain hit the ground and gradually a torrent pours as the camera cuts across to a hut overlooking a swollen river. The date 22 May 1861 is displayed on the screen indicating the starting point of the film.

While the film's vision is ultimately benign due to the intervention of the Thai king, Cherd's technique of presenting images of forming and transforming clouds as the film's opening metaphor is a means of presaging forthcoming events. Presented immediately after the inter-titles, the clouds invoke, with deliberate *gravitas*, history as a process of conflict and transformation, and this notion of

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[285] *Muen and Rid.* Dir. Cherd Songsri. Perf. Santisuk Promsiri, Ron Rittichai, Duangdao Charuchinda. Monash University: Between Three Worlds Video, 1994.

historical transformation, is an evolving theme of the film. Simultaneously, Cherd's employment of modern and traditional music creates and sets up a strong dramatic tone to the film, and suggests the merging, if not transforming process between the past and the present. The music presents a challenging struggle, as the purplish clouds darken to black leading to the impending rain of the opening scene of the film. Cherd's use of a number of Thai symbols of nature (such as elephants, clouds and rain), at the very beginning of the film establishes his filmic style in creating a Thai film associated with elements of cultural specificity. As mentioned, Cherd believes in reflecting all things Thai, and as Anchalee Chaiworaporn explains:

> Cherd himself would see his repeated attempts to create a sense of traditional, often rural, pre-modern, Thailand, as an important work of cultural resistance, an attempt to delineate the Thai personality and its basis in rural life and rural traditions, and to examine the importance of Buddhism as not only a religion but as an element significantly shaping Thai character.[286]

Thus, while the film is mainly about Muen, the film begins with the monk, Rid and his experience of saving Muen from the river during the previously described thunderstorm. It is during this rescue that Rid accidentally catches a glimpse of Muen's breasts as he pulls her through the raging water, inevitably holding her body close to his. This results in Rid being subsequently haunted by his memories of the moment, and particularly by the sight of her breasts. The sight of Muen's breasts is presented in the film in a briefly held shot, almost subliminal, as it occurred for Rid,

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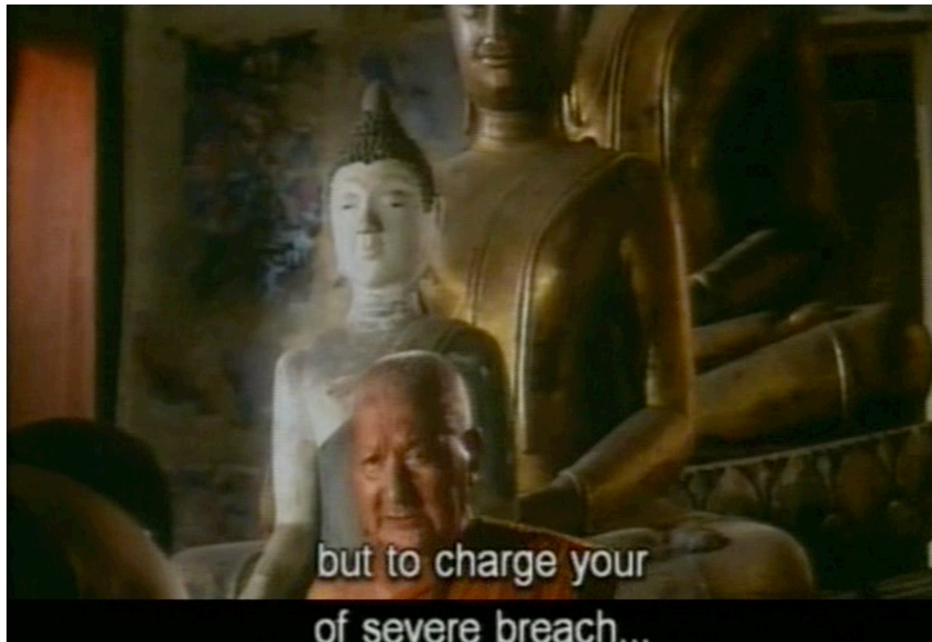
[286] Anchalee Chaiworaporn. "Thailand." *Film in Southeast Asia: Views from the Region.* Ed. David Hanan. Hanoi: SEAAPAVAA, 2001. 153.

and this shot is repeated twice again in the course of the film, as Rid recalls the images, and as a way of emphasising the lasting impact this moment had on him.

It is at this point that Rid's agency within the film is developed as the memory of Muen's breasts instigates the first conflicting element of sensuality/eroticism in the film. Rid's male eroticism is reflected in his memory of Muen's breasts, as the image leaves him shaken and results in his conflicted emotions about the encounter. The element of eroticism within the film however, is confined to Rid's character, as we are never given a sense of Muen's erotic or sensual feelings towards him. It is Rid's encounter with Muen in the river, and particularly the memory of her breasts, that renders him into a state of conflicting emotions between his devotion to Buddhism and sensual desire. This encounter also becomes a point of reckoning in Rid's life, as he is now torn between honouring his spiritual vows or giving in to his desires. Nevertheless, while Rid tries to regain his spiritual balance and focuses on purifying himself from his desires, his constant encounters with Muen makes it harder for him to return to his initial state of being.

From this point onwards, elements of Buddhist spirituality also becomes a subject within the film, as in order to cleanse himself, Rid confesses to the abbot his encounter with Muen and the conflict this has now produced in him. Rid declares to the abbot that he needs to leave the monkhood because of his impure thoughts. However, the abbot who, represents the sacred and speaks on behalf of the sacred (Buddha), believes otherwise. In this scene, the sacredness of the abbot within the hierarchy of Buddhism is demonstrated where the abbot is seated at the foot of three aligned statues of Buddha.

Image 2: The Position of the Abbot at the Foot of Three Aligned Statues of Buddha



This indication of a level of hierarchy within Buddhism, the abbot being at its foot, emphasises a sense of authority on the part of the abbot. The abbot argues that Rid's actions and thoughts were not intentional or purposeful sexual encounters, and do not entail that Rid should leave the monkhood.

Importantly, in the film although Rid's encounter with Muen's breasts is felt by Rid as a transgression, the erotic nature of the moment, as given in the film's imagery and in Rid's reactions, is given a sacred quality. Indeed I wish to suggest that within the film's diegesis, it is as though Rid's sense of the sacred in Buddhism is gradually transferred to Muen, even though initially his interest in her is not intentional. The nature of Rid's erotic gaze in his powerful memory of Muen's breasts is different from the eroticism of which Mulvey writes, where the woman is perceived as a threat and becomes the object of investigation. Muen is perceived by Rid as a threat to his religious commitments, precisely because she is now revered in

her sacredness, a perception that lifts her, and by extension all (Thai) women, as the sacredness that Rid saw in Buddha and in Buddhism, is transferred to her, a woman.

In contrast to the earlier discussed *Roro Mendut*, elements of sensuality and the erotic in *Muen and Rid* are presented with a different decorum. While *Roro Mendut* presents sensuality in terms of body movements and suggestive sharing of smoked cigarettes, sensuality and eroticism in *Muen and Rid* is related to respect and ideas of religious devotion. Rid, his mind initially shaped by spirituality, is sexually repressed, and when his desire is awakened, it is as though his spirituality transforms his intense desire in a way where it too is given a dimension of the sacred. This is further reinforced by the fact that the very practical but wise Muen is presented as a suitable object for such veneration. Perhaps this could be seen as a form of sublimation. However with the acceptance that the woman is sacred, there comes into play a sense that women must be treated with deep respect. This can be seen not only in the imagery present in the film, but in the extraordinary poster for the film, which I include as an illustration, below:

Image 3: The Film Poster for *Muen and Rid* (1983)

In this poster the lotus flower, a significant symbol within Thai culture, is a dominant motif. As the carefully graduated imagery in the poster of the film suggests, Muen's character, and her relationship with Rid, embody the three stages of the lotus flower – the seedpod, the bud and the blossom. The seedpod represents a world of comparative darkness, where Muen is trapped in a position of ignorance due to her low status in society and the overall atrocious treatment of Thai women. However, her encounter with Rid gives her a purpose, and as she tries to get closer to him, she gains the opportunity to learn to read and write. This stage represents the stage of growth and experience (of the bud phase), and as Muen learns and grows in

confidence, her ignorance of the world and her rights as a human being begin to exert themselves. Muen reaches her ultimate stage of growth, that of the lotus in full bloom, when she bravely faces her male antagonists – her father, her suitor and the judge who presides over the court that examines her case when she is brought to trial by the authorities for eloping with Rid. But ultimately all this leads her to her final encounter with the benign Thai king (unseen in the film), as she petitions for her right to choose her own partner and not be forced into an arranged marriage. Deemed as the stage of enlightenment, Muen's spirituality reaches its climax of sacredness. As a symbol of purity, the image of the lotus in full bloom suggests 'the opening of spiritual consciousness,' away from ignorance.[287] Significantly, the timely and pervasive presence of a benign ruler is expressed through the decision of the Thai king, who intervenes and hands his judgement down from on high, his physical absence expressive of this pervasive benign power. At this point the film aligns itself with hegemonic discourses in Thailand about the role of the Chakri dynasty over the last two hundred years, though it does so in the service of the progressive cause, the liberation and emancipation of Thai women.

Here I suggest that the film contains a synthesis of Eastern and Western thinking. The film is linked not only to the erotics of respect but also to the culmination of the ultimate spiritual phase of a human life—freedom. Fundamental to this is the film's allusion to the benign role of the Thai kings of the Chakri dynasty, in this case King Mongkut, also known as Rama III. Rama III is the Thai King best known for his interaction with the European governess film, presented almost as a

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[287] Taylor, Pamela York. "The Lotus and the Bodhi Tree." *Beasts, Birds, and Blossoms in Thai Art.* Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994. 87. Further description can be found at http://www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols/lotus.htm [Accessed: 13 November 2009]

fantasy in the Hollywood film *The King and I* (1956). In fact this early reforming Thai king, King Mongkut, himself spent his formative years and early middle age as a monk, leaving the monastery to ascend the throne at the age of fifty, only after that having numerous children by numerous wives. Cherd had not previously valorised the Thai kings in his films, but in *Muen and Rid* he links the aspiration for the emancipation of women from retrograde laws to the benign intervention of a Thai king, and sees this as an important moment in the history of the Thai state.

The depiction of history in the film *Muen and Rid* is not so much in the historical events that take place, but in the manner in which the film symbolically uses elements of nature as transitioning markers between scenes thus incorporating inot the film a sense of the traditional, rural, life in Thailand of the late nineteenth century. Elements of nature, such as water express the tranquillity of the natural landscape which is constantly seen throughout the film, and these images are often merged with Buddhist imagery as a means of presenting a sense of 'Thainess'. Cherd's attempts to instil nuances of Thai culture, life and beliefs are very much present within the film through such simple devices. For example, this occurs in a river scene, when after collecting alms, Rid rows away and a rainbow with a golden arch frames across his head. When Muen points to the rainbow, her grandmother chides her for being disrespectful, telling her that it is important to respect and follow old sayings and beliefs. In this instance, Cherd presents a glimpse of histories (in traditions and cultural beliefs) linked with the present, as while the younger generation perceives traditional beliefs as foolish, the elderly perceive it as a form of respect for the past. One Thai tradition that the film does not respect is, of course, its treatment of women as buffaloes.

The use of rain as a visual transition significantly identifies the turning points and stages of Muen's life as she evolves from a lowly village girl to a free woman. Rain is first used to establish the first scene of the film, as Rid rescues Muen from the swelling river, marking their first meeting. Muen's encounter with Rid inspires her to seek out the abbot at the monastery, she being intent on learning to read and write. Muen's persistence is demonstrated as she sits and waits patiently in the pouring rain, much to the discomfort of the abbot inside, who finally accedes to Muen's wishes. After Muen again refuses to return to her 'suitor', a man who has persuaded her father to make her his wife, she is imprisoned until she agrees to comply. Here heavy rain threatens to kill Muen who has been placed in a deep pit as punishment, but she escapes imprisonment and death with Rid's help.

At the most critical moment in Muen's life, towards the end of the film, in ensuring that her petition is heard by the king, with darkened clouds in the background, rain is not present, as the king himself listens to the petitions of the day. It is in the closing scene that the elemental use of rain comes full circle as Rid awaits Muen's return from the palace. As Rid waits for Muen under a hut, the pouring rain returns him, and the story, to the very beginning of their encounter by the river, and as Muen emerges through the rain, the two are reunited. Muen's petition has been accepted, and as the film draws to a close, a voice-over declares that on 18 December 1865, by Royal Decree Muen is emancipated from her parents and is free to marry whomever she chooses. It is at this point, with the royal palace forming the background, that the invisible presence of the benign King at the end of the film represents the all-important position of the monarchy. Not only does the monarch

grant Muen her request for freedom, but he also issues a royal decree abolishing the bondage laws that had been implemented for generations.

Reflections of the Thai State in *The Legend of Suriyothai* and *Muen and Rid*

As the only Southeast Asian nation not colonised by a foreign power during the nineteenth century, Thai historical films address different issues and present them from a different set of perspectives from those made in other Southeast Asian nations. The historical films discussed do not present stories from a colonial period, or dramatise stages in a struggle of independence from a foreign power, as we find in Indonesian and Malaysian films. Rather the films reveal the social and political framework of the state that is much associated with elements of Buddhism and the monarchy.[288] It was believed that the most conspicuous figure in the Siamese hierarchy, the pinnacle of it, was the king, whose word was law and to whom unlimited power was attributed.[289] The position of the king is characteristic of the formal structure of hierarchy in Siamese history that is much dominated by rank and status. [290] During late-Ayutthayan times, the lower strata of Siamese society were all more or less bound in servitude, as the bulk of the Siamese populace was divided into commoners and slaves.[291] And as a result, Thai society can be described as feudal simply because key relationships in Thai society "resemble those between

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[288] Yoneo Ishii. "The Sangha and the State." *Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986. 34.

[289] Brummelhuis, Han ten and Kemp, Jeremy H. Eds. "Introduction: Issues in the Development of the Study of Thai Society." *Strategies and Structures in Thai Society.* Amsterdam: Dept. of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Amsterdam, 1984. 20-21. Discussion is based on materials obtained referring to late seventeenth century Siam.

[290] Brummelhuis and Kemp, *Strategies and Structures in Thai Society* 21, 22, 20-28.

[291] Brummelhuis and Kemp, *Strategies and Structures in Thai Society* 28-32, 32-34.

seigneur and vassal, or between vassal and serf."[292] Thus Thai history is very much linked to particular Thai kings and the Thai monarchy in general.

> Historical studies in Thailand have been closely related to the formation of the nation since the late nineteenth century, and until recently the pattern of the past in this elitist craft changed but little. It presented a royal/national chronicle, a historiography modern in character but based upon traditional perceptions of the past and traditional materials. It was a collection of stories by and for the national elite celebrating their successful mission of building and protecting the country despite great difficulties, and promising a prosperous future. The plot and meaning of this melodramatic past have become a paradigm of historical discourse, making history an ideological weapon and a source of legitimation of the state.[293]

The richness of Thai history and culture as demonstrated in the films *The Legend of Suriyothai* and *Muen and Rid* are much linked to the representation of the monarchy who are closely tied to the people of the nation, and with strong religious reference to Buddhism. As Patsorn Sungsri argues, the *three pillars of Thai society* – the nation, religion and the monarchy, are often not only parallel but equal to one another in terms of sacredness, as the Thai monarchy is closely linked in turn to Buddhism.

> Nation, religion (Buddhism) and the monarchy are the main ideologies that link Thai people together and the core features within Thai national identity.

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[292] Hanks, L. M. Jr. "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order." *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 64, 6 (Dec., 1962). 1250.

[293] Thongchai Winichakul. "The Changing Landscape of the Past: New Histories in Thailand Since 1973." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. National University of Singapore. 26, 1 (March 1995): 99-120. 99.

> These three institutions influence the ways of life and ways of thinking of Thai people. Nation, religion and the monarchy are also significant factors that have influenced the development of Thai national cinema from the beginning of Thai film production until the present.[294]

Both these films, *The Legend of Suriyothai* and *Muen and Rid*, quite significantly instil the fundamental ideologies of the nation with regard to "Thainess" and the Thai people, and the importance of the Thai monarchy. Additionally, use of the national language within the film medium, use of authentic locations and settings that reflect both the sites of royalty and the everyday lives of the people, as well as attention to the cultural practices of its people, are all important elements in the films. References to Buddhism and Buddhist imagery and practice are found throughout both the films, as seen in the presence of the monks in their orange robes, the ritual of offering alms, Buddhist statues as guardian in homes and in courts, as well as links to nature, all of which form a formidable background to the stories. Symbolically, the presence of Buddhism is hard to separate from the daily rituals of the Thai people, as like most religions it is fully assimilated as a way of Thai life. The presence of long tradition of authoritative monarchical rule is ever present in the references to the golden years of the Ayutthaya kingdom. The high level of respect that is bestowed upon the Thai monarchy, much like accorded to Buddhism, has also become a Thai way of life.

While *The Legend of Suriyothai* may centre on the golden era of the Ayutthaya kingdom of the fifteenth century, it very much depicts the strength and weaknesses present within the creation of a massive and powerful nation. The

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[294] Patsorn Sungsri. "Introduction: Considering Thai National Cinema." *Thai Cinema as National Cinema: an Evaluative History*. Thesis. Murdoch University, 2004. 20.

monarchs of feudal Thailand, even while dominating the society, are usually shown in films as peaceful and fair as they are usually shown to base their decisions on a concern for the well-being of their people. This is exemplified by Suriyothai herself when she persuades her husband to take up the throne in opposition to a cruel king. She reminds her husband that as they are among the few remaining members of the royal family, it is their responsibility to ensure the well-being of the people in order to ease their suffering. It is also at this point in the film that Suriyothai's husband decides to leave the monastery as a means of saving the people. The representation of the Buddhist monk as sacred and honourable is very much evident in this scene, hence, the close link between the sacredness of Buddhism to that of the King as sovereign: indeed the three pillars of Thai society—nation, religion and monarchy—are once again linked here, and they are linked in turn to the people.

The central role played by the Thai monarch and the royal family as key investors, patrons and censors, has very much influenced the development of Thai national cinema, with members of the royal family playing a role in the film industry even in the 1920s.[295] Nevertheless, there are differences between *The Legend of Suriyothai* and *Muen and Rid*. *The Legend of Suriyothai* was partly funded by the Thai royal family (the present Thai queen) and in this regard was an attempt to increase the respect for Thai royalty in the eyes of the Thai people. *Muen and Rid* on the other hand begins by instilling the sacredness of Buddhism as a way of life for the people. And as this sacredness is transformed, it is transferred to the changing perspective of women, where they are no longer treated as buffalos, but as humans.

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[295] Sungsri, *Thai Cinema* 3, 161. The system of the absolute monarchy was overthrown on the 24th of June 1932, after which Thailand became a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy.

The transition of this sacredness, from religion to that of respect for women, as occurs in this film, is very profound as a means of lifting the image of women within Thai culture and society.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined three films, each of which tells its story using a different narrative form. In The *Legend of Suriyothai* we have the chronicle form. *Roro Mendut* is based on and presented as legend and folktale. *Muen and Rid* is a modern historical tale, realistically told, but presented perhaps also as a parable or as an exemplary story. Each of these forms tells us something about the way in which history was written or understood at different times in history, and also they tell us about who were the likely authors and recipient of such stories. As the chronicle strives to present a detailed, chronological and orderly yet impartial plotting of historical events, it also fills in the gaps of unavailable history, and as a result, creates a not altogether reliable form of historical narration. The film in the form of the chronicle provides a historical reference that can be indestructible as they present history according to the requirements of the state.

The legendary folktale, on the other hand, takes on the role of a folk-memory as it is told and retold across the years. Because a folk tale rarely deals with actual identifiable historical figures, it allows for greater historical license, but also facilitates a freer use of the imagination, well realised in the tale of Roro Mendut. And a modern tale of a moment in relatively recent history, as we find in *Muen and Rid,* gives a realistic account of a woman's struggle to achieve freedom, but at the

same time finds a way of itself giving respect to women at the same time as it also, ideologically, confirms hegemonic views of the role of the Thai monarchy. All the films use either introductory titles or an introductory voice over to explain the historical context of the story to be told, and its significance. But we should note that only two of these films, the two Thai films, present themselves as history, and that is because they are related to ideas of official history, being based on actual court records or on annals commissioned later by a powerful monarchy wishing to perpetuate a sense of its relation to a past history. It is only in the Indonesian film that we escape from the idea of official history, and have a history from the point of view of the ordinary people, and this history proves to be subversive of authority, or at least subversive of people like General Wiraguno.

All three films need to be seen not only as historical works but also as discourses for the present, for the period in which they were made. This has been discussed in each of the sections of this chapter. So *The Legend of Suriyothai*, which might more appropriately be entitled "The Chronicle of Suriyothai" is a film designed to endorse the importance of the Thai monarchy within the Thai state, and there is much evidence that from the point of view of the film's producers and financial backers it was designed to do precisely this. But even though its director, Prince Chatri Chalerm Yukol, is a member of the Thai royal family, he would have had his own ambitions, as a film director, to make a film that was internationally competitive and which might even win some Academy Awards. Arguments that the film would have the capacity to earn foreign capital, due to its scale and spectacular nature, and the fact that Thai history was something new to world cinema, would

also have been part of its *raison d'etre* and justification.[296] It is therefore important to see the film in terms of its many aims, rather than simply as an attempt to further underline the role of Thai monarchy and women from the Thai elite within Thai history. In the case of *Muen and Rid*, clearly there were similar goals. On the one hand, the film clearly endorses a view of Thai kings of the Chakri dynasty as benign in their governing of their people. It is also the case that with this film Cherd hoped to win international awards. For example the film was prevented from being able to be shown at Australian film festivals after its completion, for the director hoped that it would be invited to be screened at Cannes, and he believed that such an invitation would have been precluded if the film had been shown at other film festivals beforehand.

Nevertheless *Muen and Rid* is a film of great dignity and beauty, and of unusual *gravitas*, and its aim of narrating a story about a woman's attempt to achieve freedom from patriarchal oppression should be seen as its main, very progressive, ideological aim. In the case of *Roro Mendut*, this was a film that dramatised a story well known from kethoprak drama, which shortly before the film was made, had appeared as an important and well received novel. It also presents a progressive and different portrait of women, and one which is linked to ideas of women's freedom explored in at least one previous Indonesian film, *Nji Ronggeng* (1969), expressed in both films through traditional dances, such as the ronggeng and joget dances, which can be analysed as having implications for a woman's right to be free.[297] But as well,

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[296] Amporn, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 306.

[297] An earlier discussion of issues of both freedom, and the different kinds of sensuality found in a touch culture, as expressed in women's dances in films made in Indonesia, is to be found in David

as noted earlier, the fact that the General who tries to dominate Mendut is central Javanese, is a way of allegorically alluding in 1983 to the excessive power of the army-backed former general, President Suharto, also a central Javanese, who at that time was dominating Indonesia. The Indonesian film alludes critically to the way the Indonesian state was being governed at the time the film was made, but the Thai films do not have negative implications for the Thai state at the time they were made.

One important new element in the discussion of historical films that emerges in this chapter is the importance of eroticism and sensuality in two of the films, *Roro Mendut* and *Muen and Rid*. While the Thai queen, Suriyothai is a figure of great beauty and elegance, and the film as a whole is exotic in its presentation of Thai history (though not perhaps as exotic as Ayutthaya actually was), there are no explicit discourses about the erotic and the sensual in this film in the way the erotic, and the sensual are an integral part of the stories of Roro Mendut, and of Muen and Rid. Since I have spent much time in the analysis of these elements in these two films earlier in this chapter, I will simply reiterate here that the discourses of the erotic and the sensual in this film provide different paradigms for talking about the erotic and the sensual in film, from that provided in Mulvey's account of the investigative and voyeuristic gaze of the male. In these films, even though the woman's body is seen as an important way in which she is able to either control some men for some of the time, or to draw them to assist her in her plight, the erotic and the sensual are presented as a widening and a broadening of experience, for both the woman and the man, the woman's use of the power of sensuality is in no way

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Hanan, "*Nji Ronggeng*: Another Paradigm for Erotic Spectacle in Cinema." *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia*. Ed. V. Hooker. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993.

condemned. In fact, in *Muen and Rid* there is a whole “erotics of respect” that pervades and enhances the film.

We should note, however, that all three female protagonists in these three Southeast Asian historical films set in different centuries of what is broadly a feudal or semi-feudal, early modern period, are at some stage dependent on the help of a man (in each case their lover) in significant ways in their quests to achieve freedom of different kinds. In the case of Suriyothai it is her husband, though we should note that she is his advisor and strategist. In the case of Muen it is Rid, the monk whose support and the support of whose family play a crucial role at some point, and it is Rid who eventually is to become her husband. In the case of Mendut, it is Pronocitro, but only after she has shown she is skilled at playing court politics, if only for a time. In all cases the women show they are exceptional and in many ways ahead of their male helpers. But ultimately they need these male helpers, and the plot in each case is structured around this. A reason behind the formation of these relationships is because in these films about the early modern period no institutions that might help give these women rights or to enable them to unite as women are represented in the films. While the solidarity amongst some of the women in the films is evident, though sometimes strained, they are not unified in demanding better treatment or rights, and it is not clear that these highly patriarchal societies would tolerate such demand or such institutions. No rights for these women existed until, within the context of Thai history at least, a proclamation was issued by the Thai monarch, who saw the righteousness of changing the law regarding the rights of women.

Discussion of the transition to the modern that begins with my discussion of the creation of rights that occurs at the end of the film *Muen and Rid* is continued in my next chapter through an exploration into some Asian films that portray, as part of their subject, the gradual formation of modern political institutions including, modern women's institutions. In the films to be discussed, two from Japan and two from Indonesia, these institutions, and discourse about the rights of men and women, emerge in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in a number of historical contexts, for example as part of a process of slow democratisation with the creation of a parliament in Meiji Japan, or among liberals interested in education for women in Indonesia in the colonial period, or among those opposing colonialism in Indonesia, where women's associations were to some extent tolerated by colonial authorities, in contrast to forms of organisation manifesting direct opposition to colonialism. Interestingly one main characteristic of the films discussed in the next chapter is that the women protagonists depicted in them do not have to form exclusive alliances with a male partner in order to further their attempts to survive or resist oppression. These films do show their women characters in relationships with men either as partners or friends, but these men are often, in the course of the narrative, found to be unreliable and untrustworthy, hence the need for women to be even more independent, as they seek, for themselves, emancipation from the patriarchy, as well as pursuing education, and various human rights, including the right to openly work for social change within their societies.

Chapter Five

Women in Transition to the Modern

> I have so longed to make the acquaintance of a ‘modern girl’, the proud independent girl whom I so much admire; who confidently steps through life, cheerfully and in high spirits, full of enthusiasm and commitment, working not for her own benefit and happiness alone but also offering herself to the wider society, working for the good of her fellow human beings. I am burning with excitement about this new era and yes, I can say that, even though I will not experience it in the Indies, as regards my thoughts and feelings, I am not part of today’s Indies, but completely share those of my progressive white sisters in the far-off West. …And if the laws of the land allowed, I would like nothing rather than to devote myself totally to the activities and efforts being undertaken by the new woman in Europe. However, century-old traditions, which cannot be broken so readily, hold us firmly cloistered in their arms.
>
> Raden Ajeng Kartini,
> letter to Stella Zeehandelaar.
> 25 May 1899, Jepara[298]

> But right now I feel as if I’m not even living… I want to at least go out into the world… and see for myself what it means to be alive.
>
> Yukie in Akira Kurosawa’s
> *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946)[299]

Introduction

The two opening epigraphs – the first from the opening lines of Raden Ajeng Kartini’s first letter to her Dutch friend, Stella Zeehandelaar, written on 25 May 1899; and the second, a moment of yearning felt by Yukie, a fictional character in

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[298] Cote, “The Letters.” *On Feminism and Nationalism*. 23.

[299] *No Regrets for Our Youth.* Dir. Akira Kurosawa. Perf. Setsuko Hara, Susumu Fujita and Denjiro Okochi. Japan: Toho Company, 1946.

Akira Kurosawa's film *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946) – express the dreams of two young women in their early twenties who crave for independence and freedom. These aspirations for independence and freedom suggest the desires of women of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, as they begin to move forward into a modern era. Women attempting to achieve independence and freedom in historical films set in this period form the basis of this chapter. In their striving for emancipation and independence, these women experience numerous changing socio-political situations within their communities and nations.

As discussed in the previous chapter, exceptional women such as Suriyothai, Muen and Roro Mendut within films depicting earlier periods of Asian history, while showing exceptional qualities in themselves, at some point in their lives found themselves needing to rely on the support of a reliable man, usually a partner. To some extent the ingenious strategies that these women employed ensured their survival, which is why they are presented as exceptional. But in these three films male partners are important in making it possible for the women to achieve political aims (such as in *The Legend of Suriyothai*) or to try to finally achieve freedom (as described in *Roro Mendut* and *Muen and Rid*). However, these films about the early modern period do not demonstrate the presence of an institution that protects or defends the rights of women.

According to Barbara N. Ramusack, the particular status of women as daughters and wives in Southeast Asian countries is different according to particular

times and places.[300] The initial involvement of authoritative figures (such as the benign Thai king) in the late nineteenth century marks an instance of the beginnings of a transition within the women's movement in Asia, as women's rights within the patriarchal society slowly became recognised. Ramusack suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century, "the rise of nationalist movements protesting against foreign political, cultural, and economic domination offered ambivalent opportunities for women."[301] This changing situation paved a way for the women's movement to take shape within the Asian region.

This chapter investigates the position of women towards the end of the nineteenth century as they begin to form new attitudes towards their rights. While Ramusack suggests that the term 'modern' is inadequate to describe the changing situation of women in Asia, she argues that the term 'modern' does suggest the notion of 'coming into use relatively recently', and generally is used to describe a phenomena consequent upon European intervention. However, Ramusack does believe the term 'modern' "fails to portray and analyse each regional history within the context of its own internal dynamics, in which encounters with the West prove to be only one element among many."[302] Despite the wide variety of uses of the term 'modern', and the difficulty of giving it exact definition, all the films studied in this chapter show women attempting to free themselves from restrictive traditions within their societies, and from dependence on men. With reference to Laura Mulvey's

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[300] Ramusack, Barbara N. "Women in Southeast Asia." *Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History*. Eds. Barbara N. Ramusack and Sharon Sievers. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999. 84. Ramusack describes the varying positions of women during the period, for depending on the historian writing, they may be described as having 'high status' (as described by Anthony Reid and Barbara Watson Andaya) or and as subordinates who were treated as objects. 85.

[301] Ramusack, *Women in Asia* 95.

[302] Ramusack, *Women in Asia* xxiii.

framework of the inside/outside, the modern woman moves from the inner sphere of the home to the public sphere. In this context the women's historical films discussed within this chapter not only portray the early efforts of women within the Asian women's movement, but also the gradual formation of women's institutions. In addition, the modern women are placed within the changing historical and political situations of their nations, as awareness of women's rights begin to take root.

In these films, in the early stages of women's efforts for emancipation, they seek support from male-led political organisations or groups, as depicted in the Japanese film *My Love Has Been Burning* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1949) and the Indonesian film *Pioneers of Freedom* (Asrul Sani, 1980). In these instances, while the films reflect the women's relationship with a number of men, their relationships are often formal in nature or fraught, and the men are criticised by the women, and also judged by the film's narrative, for they are considered unreliable. The position of men in films about the transition to the modern period is different from the men in films of the early modern, who are seen as, of necessity, dependable and non-problematic.

The modern Asian women's historical films, as specified in this chapter, also address the relationship of these modern women to different forms of organisations within the state. For example, the film *My Love Has Been Burning* addresses women's involvement with political liberals in the changing politics of Japan in the modernising Meiji period in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This was a time when men included women within their political movements and proposed

equal rights for women.[303] At this point in history there appears to be a shift in public attitudes, as not only are women increasingly involved in political situations, but men are aware that women too are mobilising themselves in pursuit of equal rights and fair treatment within society. Set in a later period in Japan, the film *No Regrets for Our Youth* (Akira Kurosawa, Japan, 1946) presents the resistance by Japanese students and radicals to fascism in 1930s Kyoto. The film depicts events from the point of view of its female protagonist and her ideals of freedom, as she faces challenges posed by increasingly threatening historical circumstances.

The Indonesian film *Raden Ajeng Kartini* (Sjuman Djaya, Indonesia, 1984), on the other hand, not only emphasises opposition towards the colonial Dutch but also towards patriarchal Javanese cultural traditions. There was no political freedom in Indonesia from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, due to Dutch colonisation. However, the Dutch were willing to tolerate women's organisations, such as those founded by Raden Ajeng Kartini, and to support women's education.[304] The fourth film discussed in this chapter, *Pioneers of Freedom*, was adapted from the writings of prolific Indonesian author, Hamka, and focuses on the progressively changing political situation in West Sumatra in the 1920s.[305]

While I have claimed that these films manifest changing patterns of behaviour in the women depicted, these historical films are inflected by different

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[303] Ramusack, *Women in Asia* 197-202.

[304] Ricklefs, *A History of Modern India.* 144. 189-190. According to Ricklefs, 1830 marked the truly colonial period of Javanese history. The Dutch were in a position to exploit and control the whole of the island, and there were no serious challenges to their dominance until the twentieth century.

[305] Hamka, also known as Haji Abdul Malik Karim Abdullah (1908-1981), was a prominent West Sumatran born author, religious leader and politician.

generic combinations. While the films about the early modern periods can often be categorised as chronicles, legends and folktales, the modern women's historical films produced before the 1950s deploy different combinations of realism and melodrama, modern forms used to depict modern societies. The melodramatic elements contained within the Japanese historical films, to some extent, are similar to those found in the classical Hollywood melodramas of the 1930s and 1950s. But these Japanese films, both made in the 1940s, are studio films, even though made by major directors. The Indonesian films made thirty years later are freer from these studio derived generic inflections of melodrama. Nevertheless all the films concentrate on the female protagonist and reflect modern feminist concerns. In addition to examining the way the women act as agents in the films, this chapter also explores the fluctuating relationship between melodrama and realism within the evolving women's historical film.

Melodrama: Women Inside and Outside

Laura Mulvey's differentiation between inside and outside the home is a useful concept in establishing terms for the discussion of women's historical films set within a modern era. Mulvey associates the myth of Pandora's Box with ideas of interior duplicity and exterior beauty, and with the dual motif of inside/outside. Mulvey describes the 'women's interior' as either concealing a physical suffering (often associated with child-bearing), or the suffering of the mind that is associated with the woman's place in the emotional and sexual sphere of the home. A 'women's exterior' on the other hand, is a defence against the outside world and the male

gaze.[306] According to Mulvey, the interior space of the home signifies the socially domesticated position of women. Arguing her case via a study of Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s, particularly some key films by Douglas Sirk, Mulvey's framework is based on problems of class and sexual difference. For Mulvey, in cinema these differences are translated into a series of spatial metaphors: interior/exterior, inside/outside, included/excluded. The inside and outside framework suggests that space is identified by the separation of public and private spheres, where the private sphere refers to the domestic and is associated with not only woman as female, but also as wife and mother.[307] Mulvey believes that the home consists of a social and mythological place that functions within a new medium and "draws attention to the way that oppositions of inside/outside have given order and pattern to the centrifugal/centripetal tensions" as "spheres of male space (outside the home) or female space (inside the home) reflect economic and social aspects of sexual difference."[308]

However, as I shall argue, the female protagonists within the Asian historical films discussed in this chapter contest these traditional clichés and challenge them, by attempting to enter the public sphere and there to join with others to facilitate reform. However, Mulvey's broad discussion of the Sirk melodramas is that the women are trapped within this private sphere as they are not expected to be in the public sphere in any significant way. Even if the women are able to enter the public sphere, they are required to conform to the role of the loyal and devoted wife. The

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[306] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 1989. xi.

[307] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 1989. 69.

[308] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 1989. 64.

private and domestic sphere to which Mulvey refers in the films of Douglas Sirk, is the opposite of the public sphere about which Habermas has written, of mass engagements of private people coming together as a public to engage in governing discourses. The women protagonists discussed in this chapter attempt to position themselves to enter this public sphere. The emphasis of these historical films is on the women's ability to move out of the home into a discursive space that allows them to voice their concerns and seek a freedom away from their domestic constraints. The repositioning of these modern women allows them to take more control of their lives and determine their own directions. All the historical films discussed in this chapter place the women within the context of the public sphere at one point or another, as history so often occurs in the outside world.

With reference to the historical films within this chapter, while they may contain elements of the melodrama, this is mainly done in order to enhance dramatic appeal. However, by using Mulvey's framework of inside/outside to theorise the social position and the narrative trajectories of the women in the films discussed in this chapter, a number of perspectives arise. For example, a woman can enter the public sphere driven by the desire for women's equality and rights, forcing her to place herself there (such as in the film *My Love Has Been Burning*). Or a woman searches for the meaning of life in the public sphere as a means of redefining her existence (as demonstrated in the film *No Regrets for Our Youth*). Another alternative is that the manner in which women enter the public sphere may not be a physical one, but an intellectual one (such is the case with Kartini). Furthermore, a woman may seek emancipation from her husband and be forced into the public

sphere by the circumstances surrounding her predicament, as in the film *Pioneers of Freedom*.

The following discussion addresses the modern women's historical film individually in attempts to demonstrate women's efforts to enter the public sphere. The discussion argues that while these historical films reveal melodramatic moments that occur within the women's lives, the events that influence them, or one which they have some impact, are historical.

***My Love Has Been Burning* (1949)**

Using Laura Mulvey's framework of inside/outside, in my discussion of Kenji Mizoguchi's film *My Love Has Been Burning* I establish the transition of the film's female protagonist from the private sphere of the home to the public sphere of politics. However, the film's narrative also deploys a number of melodramatic elements, such as family conflict and romance/love in the protagonist's life. Markers of transition points in the woman's journey in this film are primarily historical dates and changing geographic locations outside of the home. The following discussion argues that while melodramatic elements are present within the film, historical markers identify the film more as a historical film rather than a melodrama. Furthermore, while the film succeeds in representing a woman's transition from the private sphere to the outside world, by the end of the film, her future remains uncertain.

My Love Has Been Burning presents the beginnings of the feminist movement in Japan, when women associated themselves with the male dominated

Liberal Party as a means of gaining equality and suffrage. Considered as one of Mizoguchi's strongest "feminist" works, *My Love Has Been Burning* was originally scripted by Japanese screenwriter, Kaneto Shindo.[309] The film was based on an autobiography by Hideko Fukuda (1865-1927), entitled *Half of My Lifetime.* Fukuda was a pioneer of the women's liberation movement in Meiji Japan.[310] Fukuda was also known as Hideko Kageyama: Kageyama refers to her maiden name, and Fukuda was her married name. Fukuda was an early advocate of economic independence for women and the founder of a vocational school for girls. The film, however, does not use Fukuda's name but invents a fictional female protagonist who it names Eiko Hirayama. Hirayama is played by famous Japanese actress, Kinuyo Tanaka. The film addresses the role of a woman within the actively changing political situation of late nineteenth century Japan.[311]

Produced by the Japanese studio, Shochiku, *My Love Has Been Burning* and many other Japanese melodramas prior to the 1950s are considered studio-type films involving a system of generic production.[312] Most post-war Japanese historical films prior to the 1950s (including Akira Kurosawa's *No Regrets for Our Youth*) conform to the requirements of the policies and principles of the American and Allied

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[309] McDonald, Keiko. "Facing the Occupation." *Mizoguchi*. USA: Twayne Publishers, 1984. 84.

[310] Freiberg, Freda. *Women in Mizoguchi Films* 21-22. A brief summary of Hideko Fukuda's life can also be found at <http://www.bookrags.com/research/fukuda-hideko-ema-02/>

[311] Kinuyo Tanaka was a famous Japanese actress who had acted in more than fifteen films and had a close working relationship with Mizoguchi for a number of years. However, Tanaka is better known as the first Japanese female film director. When Tanaka appealed to the film board to direct her first film, her appeal was not supported by Mizoguchi, this brought an end to their personal and working relationship. The real life scenario that involved Mizoguchi and Tanaka very much reflects the events that occur to the character Hirayama in the film.

[312] Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is* 22. Gledhill describes how specific "techniques for 'cinematic' narration and a standard model of circuit distribution" is employed in the production of a generic studio-type film.

Occupation, which commenced in 1945. The policies and principles of the American/Allied Occupation were in accordance with the view that Japanese society, and particularly the position of Japanese women, needed to change.[313]

Writing from a feminist point of view, Freda Freiberg presents a carefully composed set of arguments about women Mizoguchi films. Freiberg argues that women in Mizoguchi films are usually (if compassionately), presented as victims and 'losers'. Freiberg claims that *My Love is Burning* displays, what she refers to as "the conventions of the melodrama of defeat": the heroine does not deserve her fate and she is considered the victim of lust, greed, ambition and the selfishness of men or of an unjust social system.[314] Freiberg also argues that *My Love Has Been Burning* fails to acknowledge the historically significant contribution of Fukuda. She argues that the film represses Fukuda's accomplishments in a number of ways: veiling the names of the characters, providing a melodramatic title, suppressing evidence regarding Fukuda's very considerable professional work, and presenting a distortion of her private life (for example Fukuda's education and feminist ideals were actually fostered by her mother, while in the film Hirayama's mother is presented as a weak woman who sides with Hirayama/Fukuda's repressive father).[315] In addition, Freiberg also suggests that the political actions by the female protagonist, Hirayama, are presented as motivated primarily by her attachment to men, first to her fiancé, Hayase, and then to Omoi, a well-known politician. Freiberg believes that the film

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[313] Kyoko Hirano. "*No Regrets for Our Youth*." *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992. 182. According to Hirano, "the emancipation of women was one of the occupation's top priorities, and, in fact, equality of women was mandated by the 1947 Constitution of Japan."

[314] Freiberg, *Women in Mizoguchi Films* 12.

[315] Freiberg, *Women in Mizoguchi Films* 18-19.

script "erases the historical Fukuda and replaces her with a heroine who is less exceptional an individual and more like the conventional victimized heroine of conventional women's melodramas."[316]

While I agree with much of Freiberg's case, I argue that *My Love Has Been Burning* does in some respects contain more history than Freiberg allows, and that in the film, Hirayama/Fukuda is not simply presented as motivated only by the interior world of her personal life. The divisions of the film into narrative phases, based on four location settings (Okayama, Tokyo, Chichibu and Tokyo) identifies critical historical turning points in Hirayama's life that aligns with specific action-relationship lines within the narrative.

In my analysis of this film, I use Linda Aronson's schema for analysing a film into two parallel streams, an action line and a relationship line.[317] As described by Aronson, the action line refers to the main plot and must move from action to action. It is of superior importance and exists to permit the formation of the relationship line.[318] In *My Love Has Been Burning*, I will demonstrate, the action line is the line which traces historical events and the character's participation in them. The relationship line refers to the different relations formed by the characters, and the way these relationships evolve and change. In Aronson's schema, the relationship line is a kind of subplot and the action line is superior, for without the action line relationships would not happen, or as Aronson puts it herself, only "the action line

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[316] Freiberg, *Women in Mizoguchi Films* 19.

[317] Linda Aronson is a scriptwriter who has also written on the topic of scriptwriting.

[318] Aronson, Linda. "Development Strategies for a Traditional Three-Act Film." *Scriptwriting Updated: New and Conventional Ways of Writing for the Screen*. AFTRS, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2000. 54.

permits the relationship line to happen."[319] In *My Love Has Been Burning*, however, a strict distinction between the action line and the relationship line is not entirely possible, for part of the action is the formation and breaking of relationships.

Aronson's schema is useful as a way of highlighting how in *My Love Has Been Burning*, the formation and breaking of relationships is often cross referenced with political developments in history. Indeed the film emphasises the public reasons (based on principle) for what at times are seen by men as private decisions, based on female emotional needs. In most melodramas, female characters remain in the private sphere, or even if they make decisions while in the public sphere, these decisions are based on private feelings only. In examining the historical turning points in *My Love Has Been Burning* marked by location change and the changing relations between the characters, we can see how the film finds a way of representing Hirayama's feminist politics. *My Love Has Been Burning* begins with the opening prologue:

> This film is an appeal to the world for truly free women – Describing the agony of a woman who fought a feudal society.

The opening scene of the film, set in the town of Okayama in 1884, introduces the film's female protagonist, Hirayama, and establishes her relationship with her family, her boyfriend Hayase, and the family housemaid, Chiyo. The film depicts Hirayama amongst a group of male Liberal Party supporters who await the arrival of female advocate, Toshiko Kishida, who has come to give a speech.[320] Hirayama's

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[319] Aronson, *Scriptwriting Updated* 56.

[320] Toshiko Kishida (1863-1901) was a Japanese feminist who fought for women's rights. She was part of 'Japan's first wave feminists' and focused on helping middle and upper class girls. Further

public presence early in the film signifies her active participation within a political environment, and demonstrates the non-conformity of her character, as a young woman involved in political activities outside the traditional home. This scene establishes Hirayama within the outside sphere and in a situation largely dominated by males. In addition, her ambitions are also established at this point in the film, as she expresses her desire to further her studies in Tokyo. However, her boyfriend Hayase's unsupportive and illiberal-like treatment of Hirayama prefigures upcoming problems with their relationship.

As the film continues, it introduces Hirayama's relationship with her parents and with the housemaid, Chiyo. Hirayama's relationship with her father is strained as he disapproves of her spending time outside the home, attending political rallies, something uncommon in girls of the period. However, upon her return home Hirayama's father informs her that the governor has restricted her to the house and that her school for girls has been closed, forcing Hirayama into the interior space of the home. Her father's patriarchal authority dictates that she remains inside the home, confining her once again to the traditional place for most Japanese women of the period. With her freedom now restricted, her school closed, and her discovery that her friend, the housemaid, Chiyo, is being sold to a trader, Hirayama's life at this point dramatically comes to a dead-end. Nevertheless, the turning point of the film is Hirayama's reaction to this situation. Hirayama decides to move to Tokyo to pursue further education. At this point in the film, Hirayama enters history as she makes the initial step to engage independently in the outside/external world of the home.

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readings on Toshiko can be accessed from: "Women's Rights from Past to Present." *Women in History Curriculum.* 1996-2010. 5 April 2009. [6 September 2010] <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/WR-04.html>

Tokyo marks the second phase of the film. Hirayama heads to the Liberal Party office looking for Hayase. At the office she meets Liberal leader, Omoi. At this point the film presents a glimpse of Omoi's personality who, while charming to Hirayama, demonstrates a cavalier attitude. Omoi is blasé and indifferent when, in taking Hirayama to Hayase's boarding house, he brushes off the landlord's questions regarding rental payment. This scene suggests that Omoi is opportunistic in his politics, and although he helps Hirayama, he is disrespectful of others and ignores his obligations to them. Omoi does not act responsibly and is inconsistent in the way he treats others.

This second phase of the film however, focuses on Hirayama's failing relationship with Hayase. In independently entering the public sphere of Tokyo because the political situation has failed for her in Okayama, Hirayama hopes for Hayase's support. However, Hirayama discovers that Hayase refuses to be responsible for her, and he questions her resilience in pursuing her ideals. The film pointedly shows that Hayase makes the assumption that Hirayama has come to Tokyo to marry him, when this is not the case. This comic portrayal of Hayase's self-indulgence when he says that if Hirayama has come to marry him, "He needs to adjust his thinking accordingly," depicts how he misunderstood Hirayama's real aims, and that Hayase prefers to patronise her, rather than understand her. Selfishly, Hayase turns a political decision on Hirayama's part (to move to Tokyo to pursue her studies) into a personal and emotional interpretation on his part (to marry him), one which Hirayama quickly denies.

This scene is critical as it shows how men tend to misread women. Hirayama is disappointed that Hayase views her as a woman only worthy of becoming a wife.

She is also shocked in finding that the patriarchal chauvinism she experienced in Okayama continues even in Tokyo. Hirayama is dismayed by Hayase's view of her, for she had thought he understood that she was a radical pursuing a radical goal. With Hayase's misreading of her intentions, he too has compromised her presence within a public sphere by returning her to the 'box' of the traditional role of women.

With Hirayama's break up from Hayase, this second phase of the film draws to a close with the dissolution of the Liberal Party (approximately in 1885).[321] This historical event, the dissolution of the Liberal Party, influences Hirayama's relationship with Omoi. Hirayama chooses to remain supportive of not only Omoi's political ideals but also her own. Hirayama and Omoi join forces and continue their political aims of pursuing both democracy and rights for women. However, this political merger influences their personal relationship, as by the end of this second phase of the film, Omoi and Hirayama have become lovers. At this stage, while the turning points within the film are political on Hirayama's part, they are too often read by the men as being non-political and this will form Hirayama's biggest challenge at a later point in the film.

A noted characteristic of Mizoguchi's filmic style is his use of what is known as the V-diagram in staging and shooting intense moments in the story. The V-diagram, identified by a number of scholars, is used to set up and trace changing positions of power and conflict between his characters.[322] One example of the V-

[321] Cullen, L.M. "Fashioning a State and a Foreign Policy: Japan 1868-1919." *A History of Japan, 1582-1941: Internal and External Worlds*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 220. The scene in the film depicts events that occur in 1885 when the Cabinet government was established. However, the film does not specify the year as to when the Liberal Party was dissolved.

[322] Chika Kinoshita. "Choreography of Desire: Analysing Kinuyo Tanaka's Acting in Mizoguchi's Films." *Screening the Past.* December, 2001. 11 May 2010.

diagram in the film depicts Hirayama's relationship with Hayase, as this relationship takes a dramatic turn for the worse. After Omoi accuses Hayase of being a spy for the government, Hirayama follows Hayase back to the boarding house. In the scene that then takes place inside the bedroom, the position of the characters and space within the film frame are set up in the form of a V-diagram. As Hirayama confronts a drunken Hayase, who tries to justify his actions as being patriotic, Hayase suddenly tries to force himself on Hirayama. Hirayama fights him off and the two struggle. A partition falls over and fills half of the film screen. The position of the fallen partition marks the foreground of the scene and creates a point of reference that dramatically defines the depth of field within the shot that extends from the floor on the near side of the room, to the entrance door and exit set back in deep space. In their struggle, the characters fall off-screen, and only the sounds of their struggle fill the space between the fallen partition and the exit door of the room, the director deploying a combination of deep space and off-screen sound to convey the struggle between the couple.

The following still image illustrates a moment from the above scene, in which the V-formation is created between the fallen partition, Hirayama (just before she exits the room), and Hayase who is off-screen.

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr1201/ckfr13a.htm> - Discussion and analysis of Mizoguchi's staging and the V-diagram is best explained by Jean Douchet's schema in Kinoshita.

Image 4: An Example of the V-diagram in *My Love Has Been Burning* (1949)

At this point, the camera remains in a fixed position, and it is the character movement that produces a V-movement again, framed by the fallen partition in the foreground. The camera remains tilted bottom-up. After a few seconds Hirayama returns from screen left, corrects her clothes, turns to Hayase in disgust and exits screen right. Freiberg suggests that Mizoguchi's composition of Hirayama's traumatic experience is characteristic of his films where rapes, murders, executions, suicides and all instances of brutality occur in off-screen spaces or are hidden from view by the positioning of a masking object between the camera and the violent action.[323] However the conclusion to this scene is considered by Mark Le Fanu as the point at which Hirayama reaches "a decisive moment in her coming to consciousness" as she realises the limitations of being a women.[324] This scene is the first of two major betrayals that Hirayama experiences, and, in my view, both

[323] Freiberg, *Women* 5.

[324] Le Fanu, Mark. "Respectable Women." *Mizoguchi and Japan*. London: BFI Publishing, 2005. 134-135.

betrayals are shown to intensify her sense of political commitment to women's rights and to taking an independent approach to how they can be achieved.

As Hirayama's story continues, the third phase of the film takes place in the village of Chichibu. In Chichibu, Hirayama and Omoi attempt to help villagers deal with abusive employers of a silk mill, who are torturing their village girl employees. Throughout the film, Hirayama has been constantly active in the public sphere. Similarly, in Chichibu too, Hirayama volunteers to investigate the women's position at the silk mill, emphasising the determination of her character. At the silk mill Hirayama discovers the amount of abuse, rape and torture that the working girls face. She also finds a raped and abused Chiyo among them. In a moment of anger and retribution, Chiyo sets fire to the silk factory. As the fire spreads, Hirayama runs into the mill to save Chiyo. However, in the end both she and Chiyo are arrested.

This third phase of the film re-establishes Hirayama's relationship with Chiyo. At this point, Chiyo is a victim because society has forced her into a series of impossible positions. In Chiyo's efforts to rebel and defend herself, she remains trapped as a victim of her actions, as her brief rebellion in starting the fire leads only to her arrest. It is here that the film takes on a different quality and focuses on the plight of the underprivileged women within society, people such as Chiyo, in contrast to previous scenes where Hirayama is involved in the political struggles of middle class liberals. Here the film modulates in a more sustained way into more traditional kind of melodrama, the poor and uneducated Chiyo is placed in an environment of poverty and experiences changes in fortune. Chiyo is defenceless in the manner she is treated by society; she has been sold like merchandise by her father

and, while working in a factory subjected to abuse and different kinds of maltreatment. This leads to Hirayama deciding to become Chiyo's protector.

The third turning point in *My Love Has Been Burning* occurs with the proclamation of the 1889 Constitution and results in the granting of amnesty to all political prisoners including Hirayama and Omoi. Consequently, Hirayama and Omoi are soon reunited and return to Tokyo. As identified in phase one and two of the film, the turning points within the film relate to historical events that occur in Hirayama's life rather than based on melodramatically conceived personal crises. Her actions are not influenced by her emotions but by the historical events that take place.

The fourth phase of the film begins with Omoi's release from prison, and it explores Hirayama's new relationship with Omoi as they involve themselves again in liberal politics. Hirayama sets up house with Omoi, but this soon results in comments from men in the Liberal Party who refer to Hirayama as the woman 'looking after' Omoi. This insensitive attitude of the men re-emphasises the shallow perception men have towards women: it is a male expectation that Omoi needs to be supported by a woman, and that this is all that Hirayama wants to do. But a question arises from this situation – does Hirayama's domestic role return her to the internal space often related to women? The film reveals that Hirayama willingly stays with a politician such as Omoi because it allows her to remain involved in politics, and the political changes that Omoi could implement (including those on behalf of women), now he has some power, could be significant. However, Hirayama does naively bring Chiyo into her home, an action that leads to Omoi initiating an affair with her.

In discovering Omoi's affair with Chiyo, Hirayama remains calm as she considers the implications of her discovery. This is in contrast to Omoi's reaction when he states, "Having two women is alright," while he refers to Chiyo as a vile woman, a mistress. Disappointed by Omoi's misogynistic view not only towards Chiyo but also towards women in general, Hirayama calculates her next action. At this point the historical action line and relationship line between Hirayama's decisions are amalgamated as Hirayama makes a political decision to remain loyal and supportive of Omoi in his hour of political need. The climax of the film, however, occurs after Omoi is appointed as the first member of the Liberal Party to enter the Diet after the first general election in 1890.[325] It is at this point, when Omoi is successful, that Hirayama decides to leave Omoi and return to Okayama. Hirayama's decision is not based on her relationship or her feelings for Omoi but is based on her feminist politics. Disappointed by Omoi's broken promises of women's liberation, equality and suffrage, Hirayama rejects Omoi, her farewell words being:

> While man does not recognize woman as another human being and considers women a tool of the family… There's no freedom, no true human rights.

Hirayama's rejection of Omoi is not melodramatically conceived in a moment of violent disappointment. It remains a very rational decision on Hirayama's part. Hirayama is calm and collected as she makes her decision and reveals her decision to Omoi. The film ends with a denouement, in a scene showing Hirayama within the enclosed space of a train carriage. In the semi-lit train carriage, Chiyo enters and joins Hirayama in the compartment. She begs for Hirayama's forgiveness and for a

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[325] Cullen, *A History of Japan* 220.

chance to return to Okayama with her. The film ends with the future of both women remaining uncertain.

My Love Has Been Burning focuses on Hirayama as the film's female protagonist, but is also insightful about men. No matter how much the politics of the nation may change, traditional male perceptions about women are much harder to transform, as represented by the attitudes of Hayase and Omoi. As Freiberg states, the "combination of the narrative thrust and the characterization (all the men are villains) suggests that the film advocates the liberation of women from male oppression," and that even the most liberal of men 'cannot be trusted', and that women must join together to fight that oppression.[326] The film constantly points out the inadequacies of men in the character of both Hayase and Omoi, but is does so in subtle ways, showing them not only as chauvinistic, but misreading Hirayama's motives. The film also isolates particular points of sexist male ideology, such as when Hayase repeatedly proposes to Hirayama, thinking it as the only way out for her. The fact that even Omoi, for all his liberal ways, continues to think that it is not wrong to have two women, one as wife and the other mistress, who can live in the same house at the same time is chauvinistic. Ultimately it is Omoi's attitude that is unacceptable to Hirayama. Japanese critic, Tadao Sato argues that *My Love Has Been Burning* is typical of Mizoguchi's work, as it is:

> …an indictment of masculinity and showing a distrust of men. The men who surround the passionate heroine are all shameful specimens, not worth

[326] Freiberg, *Women* 19.

> helping; the heroine's task is to shatter the illusions about male authority. This is an enduring motif through all of Mizoguchi's work.[327]

Mulvey's description of the melodrama as a cathartic form acting as a form of release for women confined to the home is a useful starting point for examining *My Love Has Been Burning,* for the reason that Hirayama goes into the public sphere of oppositional politics, rather than remaining in the home. The drama of the film does provoke catharsis, for Hirayama is frequently frustrated in her public activities, but the film also produces a series of perceptions about women attempting to act in the world outside of the home, in a sphere usually regarded as exclusively a male domain.

My Love Has Been Burning is a historical film dealing with a woman's relationship with history at the time where she plays an active role in it. While the film has melodramatic aspects (for example in the scenes showing Chiyo's oppression and the factory fire, and also in the scene where Hayase attempts to dominate Hirayama sexually), it is not simply a conventional melodrama, because the significant turning points within the film are not linked to the protagonist's emotions but to history and to Hirayama's political decisions. In addition, Hirayama's decisions are seen as rational, while the behaviour of the males is seen as often based on ambition rather than only on principles. In addition, the film decisively positions itself outside the domestic sphere, because it clearly marks the changing historical moments that the protagonist experiences throughout the film.

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[327] Tadao Sato. "A Difficult Woman." *Kenji Mizoguchi and the Art of Japanese Cinema.* Eds. Aruna Vasudev and Latika Padgaonkar. Oxford: Berg, 2008. 90.

The following table summarises the action-relationship line based on the historical events shown in the film:

Table 8: Action-Relationship Line based on Historical Events in *My Love Has Been Burning* (1949)

Historical Time Frame	Action Lines	Relationship Lines
1884 Okayama	The closure of Hirayama's school for girls and her restriction to the home. Hirayama goes to Tokyo to seek education and involve herself in politics there.	Hirayama's relationship with her parents is strained. Her relationship with Hayase is hopeful. Her relationship with Chiyo is broken.
1885 Tokyo	The dissolution of the Liberal Party. Hayase accused of being a government spy. Hirayama involves herself in social work in villages	Hirayama becomes aware of Hayase's limitations in his attitudes to her. Hirayama forms a new political and personal alliance with Omoi.
1889 Chichibu	Hirayama is imprisoned, a result of the silk mill fire. The declaration of the new Constitution results in political amnesty. Hirayama is released.	Hirayama reunites with Chiyo in jail and becomes her protector. Hirayama reunites with Omoi.
1890 Tokyo	The Liberal Party enters the Diet. However, women's rights remain ignored. Hirayama returns to Okayama to reopen her school for women.	Hirayama discovers Omoi's relationship with Chiyo. Hirayama leaves Omoi, on principle. Chiyo joins Hirayama on her journey back to Okayama.

A comparison of the action line with the relationship line is a means by which one can see the links between the central character and historical developments. Hirayama's decisions about opportunities provided by historical events based on her principles and on her passion for the development and emancipation of women (rather than on her personal emotional life) are key turning points in her development and in the narrative progression. As Tadao Sato suggests, the film uses a political movement and their moments of political advance and political setbacks, as a key

part of the action.[328] Key turning points in the film are related to the film's perception that men's behaviour towards women is not only chauvinist and oppressive, but are based on their misreading of a woman's motives. Hirayama's primary decisions are based on the action required by those historical movements and on her political and feminist views, not on emotions generated by emotional priorities. In this sense while the film has melodramatic elements at times coded in ways similar to other Mizoguchi films, it is more an historical film about a politically active woman involved in changing political situations, rather than a melodrama.

***No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946)**

Akira Kurosawa's *No Regrets for Our Youth* was produced a year after the end of World War II. It was his first film post-war. The film provides new images for Japanese youth, after years of propaganda films supporting Japanese fascism. The film contains characters who regard Japan's defeat at the end of World War Two as liberation from militarism and the beginning of a new democratic era.[329]

Joan Mellen suggests that Kurosawa's *No Regrets for Our Youth* is one of the finest examples of a Japanese film about a woman's struggle for personal liberation.[330] The original script for *No Regrets for Our Youth* was written by Eijiro Hisaita and was based on actual historical events, involving Hotsumi Ozaki, a well-connected Tokyo journalist who was privy to cabinet secrets, and also on an earlier

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[328] Sato, *Kenji Mizoguchi and the Art of Japanese Cinema* 90.

[329] Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. "Oshima's Cruel Story of Youth." *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*. Eds. Alastair Phillips and Julian Stringer. New York: Routledge, 2007. 170.

[330] Mellen, *Waves at Genji's Door* 41.

historical event, incident that occurred at Kyoto University.[331] Because Ozaki was secretly opposed to Japanese fascism and the actions of Japan in the Pacific War, Ozaki passed cabinet secrets on to the Soviet spy, Richard Sorge.[332] In the end, Ozaki and Sorge were both arrested, and in 1944 both were executed in Tokyo for being spies and agents of the enemy. However it is reported that the original film script for *No Regrets for Our Youth* had to be rewritten because at about the same time there was a similar script in circulation at the studio, Toho Company Ltd. As a result of studio pressure, Kurosawa was forced to make changes in the original script.[333]

The film is also based on the infamous Takigawa Incident of 1933 relating to the expulsion of Professor Yukitoki Takigawa from the Faculty of Law, Kyoto University. As it opens the film introduces a group of students who are attempting to fight fascism in the form of the restrictions the government is beginning to place on the universities with regards to academic freedom and freedom of speech. Primarily the film presents this history from the point of view of a female student who is also the film's protagonist, Yukie. Yukie, played by Japanese actress, Hara Setsuko, is the fictional daughter of the sacked Professor Yagihara. *No Regrets for Our Youth*

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[331] Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro. "*No Regrets for Our* Youth." *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. 119. Eijiro Hisaita was "a well-known leftist writer of *shingeki* plays and film scripts and also wrote the script of *A Morning with the Osone Family*, which was *Kinema junpo's* number one film of the year (*No Regrets for Our Youth* was voted second best)." For the film's producer, Keiji Matsuzaki, *No Regrets for Our Youth* was more than just a "democratization film" dealing with recommended subjects."

[332] Richard Sorge was an infamous Soviet spy who worked as a journalist in Germany and Japan, when he was finally captured 18 October 1941 and later hanged on 7 November 1944. He would be known as the spy who changed history.

[333] Akira Kurosawa. *Something Like an Autobiography*. Trans. Audie E. Bock. New York: Vintage Books, 1983. In Kurosawa's autobiography, he records that the last section of the film was changed drastically. However, he later declares that the original script was better than the one eventually made. There is no evident record as to what Kurosawa's hopes and expectations for the original version were. And thus we will never know how he intended the film to become.

dramatises Yukie's responses to this situation, as she becomes committed to the idea of pursuing political action in whatever form this may take. While at times Yukie reacts in highly emotional ways, characteristic of the representation of women in melodrama, I argue that the film remains a film about engagement with history, given the way that Yukie constantly faces challenges posed by history rather than simply by her own inclinations. As well, *No Regrets for Our Youth*, like *My Love is Burning*, periodises its narrative according to specific historical dates and places: Kyoto in 1933, Kyoto in 1938, Tokyo in 1941, and Kyoto in 1945.

The first phase of the film begins in 1933 in Kyoto, as a group of students walk along a grassy path in the countryside, among them, Yukie. As the students cross a stream, Yukie balances on the stepping-stones and tries to gain the attention of two of her male colleagues, Noge and Itokawa. This scene within the film sets up a melodramatic-themed love triangle between Yukie, Noge and Itokawa. It demonstrates Noge's ability to take action (as he steps into the stream and sweeps Yukie off her feet), while Itokawa remains passive on the riverbank. In setting up the relationship between the main characters, Kurosawa's first instance of experimental use of film form occurs as Yukie and her colleagues continue their journey and begin to run up a steep hill. Kurosawa's continuous, fluid, uphill tracking shot of the three main characters revels in the unhindered movement of the characters. The sound of their companionable laughter takes away the 'sting' of the earlier scene of competition between Noge and Itokawa and replaces it with camaraderie. However, this scene creates a sense of disbelief as the fluid motion suggests ease in the lives of these students, who at this point in time seem too carefree. The sequence ends with the discovery, in the grass, of a soldier injured in military exercises.

Upon returning to Yukie's house, the political stance of the film's three main characters becomes clear. The film first shows Noge, whose character is inspired by the spy Ozaki, as being passionately opposed to the militarist takeover of Manchuria and to the growing power of industrialists allied with the military. Noge's passion is in contrast to the attitude of Itokawa, who remains reserved and does not choose sides. Yukie at this point refuses to involve herself in politics and makes snide remarks. Soon after, Noge leads a student demonstration at the time of the 1933 Kyoto University incident. The film recalls the Kyoto University incident by using archival footage of mass student demonstrations in protest at the lack of academic freedom within the university. The film uses an array of high angle shots of crowds of marching students crossing campus grounds and holding speeches and displaying banners, while later they are shown publicising news of the campaign in the newspapers. However, the demonstrations are suppressed and hundreds of students are arrested, including Noge.

The climax of this first part of the film is the suppression of the student demonstrations. Kurosawa then ends this first section of the film through the dramatic use of song, as students from the failed campaign of demonstrations, take to the streets in a drunken fashion. This is Kurosawa's second use of song, the first being in the early stages of the film in the countryside as Yukie and her friends are walking along a stream. In contrast to the first song, which is melodious and calm and where the students sing about the beauty of nature, the second song describes the students' frustration and disappointment at the failure of their demonstrations. The tune of the songs remains the same, but the pace and words are changed to accommodate the situation of the time. In addition, shortly afterwards, leading into

the second phase of the film, during the transition from 1933 to 1938, the same tune is used again, but this time – as seen in its lyrics and new rhythms – it is a thoroughly militarist version of the music, as departing troops are seen marching along the same road, now overlaid with a title 1938. This is a deliberate contrast with the second version of the song, but once again the differences are highlighted by the way that the comparison and contrast graphically express the rapid changes occurring within the nation, and their consequences for young people.

Table 9: Songs as Historical Markers, Lyrics to the Musical Choruses of 1933 and 1938 in *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946)

1933 - opening scene in the countryside	1933 – at the end of the Kyoto University demonstrations	1938 – Soldiers heading off to war
Flowers on the knoll. Blazing crimson red. Plants along the river. A bright, glowing green. I sigh in delight at the flowers of Kyoto. The moon rising high above Mount Yoshida.	Hundreds of miles from Tokyo. Kyoto University was caught in fascism's glare. Freedom and independence were crushed beyond repair. Yesterday our dreams came to an end.	We left our homeland. Swearing to return victorious. Death is only acceptable serving our country with distinction. Whenever the bugles sound the march. We remember the sea of flags that saw us off.

The second phase of the film, set in Kyoto in 1938, starts as the band of soldiers head off to war with China, marching past an older Yukie. It has now been five years since the end of the Kyoto University demonstrations. This second phase of the film focuses on a changing Yukie as the film draws attention to Yukie's dilemma and frustration as she grows into adulthood. From the beginning of the film Yukie has been portrayed as docile in character. But, as Yukie's mother explains, as a little girl, Yukie was different and liked to draw planes and locomotives. This small insight into Yukie's character suggests that there is a different, 'hidden' side to Yukie that has not been revealed. The film foreshadows the possibility of Yukie's

suppressed emotions and thoughts revealing being revealed in due course in the unfolding events.

The film shows that Yukie reluctantly accepts and conforms to the traditional mould of a Japanese middle-class girl by gaining a university education, being skilfully trained in playing the piano, studying flower arrangement and learning to type, much like other Japanese girls of her age. Nevertheless, Yukie reaches a breaking point during a flower arrangement lesson when she suddenly rips off flower blossoms and throws them into a bowl. In addition, when Yukie plays a musical piece by Mussorgsky, a tune called ‘The Great Gate of Kiev’, the way she plays the piece (and the piece itself) expresses a demand in Yukie for something more in life than her current circumstances give her.

The emphasis of this second phase of the film is on Yukie’s growing restlessness with her life. Reuniting with Itokawa and Noge during one of their visits to her house, Yukie’s emotional reaction reaches its climax, as Kurosawa, much like in a silent film, captures Yukie’s facial expressions. The scene employs an experimental five-shot series of freeze frames, where there is no dialogue. Each shot captures Yukie’s musings from behind her room door as Noge and Itokawa are about to leave and await her downstairs. We see Yukie’s expressions as she: (1) leans back against the door; (2) grabs onto the door handle; (3) cups her face with her hands; (4) leans flat against the door; and finally (5) stands in defiance with folded arms. Kurosawa dissolves between each of these frozen images, creating an effect reminiscent of some moments in the silent cinema. Kurosawa clearly wanted to achieve a higher degree of visual expressiveness, particularly in moments when Yukie’s subjectivity cannot be articulated verbally. The shots reveal Yukie’s

emerging strength of will, but at this stage she has no one with whom she can share her feelings.

The turning point for this second phase of the film occurs after Noge and Itokawa leave the Yagihara house. Frantically Yukie packs her bags as she decides to leave home for Tokyo. Discovering Yukie's intentions, Professor Yagihara confronts her. The following dialogue, part of which is used as one epigraph for this chapter, not only demonstrates Yukie's frustrations but her desperate need for freedom:

```
                Yukie
I want to start my life all over
again.
               Father
Living out in the world isn't as
simple as you think.
                Yukie
I know… But right now I feel as
if I'm not even living… I want
to at least go out into the
world… and see for myself what
it means to be alive.
               Father
If you've thought this through,
then go. Forge your own way
through life. It's worth a try.
But remember: You have to take
responsibility for your actions.
Freedom… is something you have
to fight for. There will be
difficult sacrifices and the
heavy burden of responsibility.
Remember that.
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Kurosawa as a director is clearly interested in the ambivalence of feeling he finds in his central character, and, as a young director, in finding means to express it. Yukie's inner turmoil (her dissatisfaction, and her inability to identify a clear goal for herself) is an example of what Mulvey refers to as the inner suppressed emotions, a characteristic of a female protagonist confined to the home, an identifying feature of

the Sirkian melodramas set in America in the 1950s, but here briefly isolated and explored in a Japanese film set in the 1930s and 1940s. However, in this film the female protagonist, Yukie, chooses to step into the outside world in order to overcome the limitations of her inner world.

Yukie's position in the exterior world is explored in the third phase of the film that continues in 1941 Tokyo. In Tokyo, a calm and confident Yukie (who is now working in an office) bumps into Itokawa and discovers that Noge too is in the city. Upon hearing news of Noge, Yukie's demeanour changes and she returns to her ambivalent earlier self. Yukie's ambivalent feelings for Noge are expressed in a sequence that covers her repetitive behaviour in the same space (the street outside of Noge's office) over a time-period of some months. Kurosawa sets up a view of the outside street from inside a shop and the audience views events through a framed set of shop windows. Representation of Yukie's ambivalence begins as she stands in front of the shop window, paces, looks up (at Noge's office) and contemplates whether to go up to see him. Her hesitant pacing and her yearning look every time she passes the window and glances up indicates the dilemma she faces in confronting Noge again. The staging of the initial part of this repetitive sequence of shots suggests that it is summer, for Yukie and passer-bys are dressed in light, loose clothes. However, time unfolds in a continuous play of changing seasons glimpsed through the shop window. Yukie continues to pass by the window first, on a rainy autumn day; and again on a wind-blown winter day; and finally, Yukie returns in spring to stand in front of the shop window, uncertain in her desire to see Noge again. This transition of time indicates that a full year has passed, but Yukie has yet

to gain the confidence to face Noge. Yukie's dilemma however, ends when Noge sees her and then confronts her in front of the shop.

Yukie's reunion with Noge sees the commencement of an emotionally stable and purposeful period of life for Yukie. But Noge's secret life (of leftist writings) casts a shadow on their future. Yukie fears the day when Noge may be made accountable for his actions. At this stage Yukie's emotional conflict is reflected in the fast cut and choppy montage-like scenes that reflect the nature of their relationship. The scene shows Yukie's 'roller-coaster' of emotions. For example, while she and Noge are singing and laughing during a walk in the hills, her mood suddenly turns sombre and sad; and while sitting in a crowded cinema where everyone is laughing hilariously, Yukie is crying. Yukie's transition from one emotion to another, happy-sad-angry-scared, within the span of approximately two minutes suggests her ambivalence within a single period of time and reveals her lingering uncertainty as it foreshadows her fears of an uncertain future for Noge.

Yukie's life takes a dramatic turn with Noge's arrest and this begins a significant change in her life as she is now again alone. However, for the first time in the film Yukie shows confidence as she puts up a strong front and she remains loyal to Noge during his interrogation by the authorities. The turning point of the film and in Yukie's life arrives with Noge's sudden death in prison. This traumatic news results in Yukie making the decision to send Noge's remains to his parent's home in the village. At this point, Yukie's transformation from an ambivalent girl to a woman committed to the memory of her dead husband indicates a change in her overall character as she firmly decides on a new direction for her life.

Yukie decides to stay with Noge's parents and help them care for the land. At this point in the film, Kurosawa shows Yukie's transition and transformation from one life to the other as Yukie begins her new life in clean white clothes and hacks at the hardened land. Yukie the city girl, with fair skin, pretty clothes and clean hands, gradually transforms into an earthy darkened portrait of a paddy farmer. Close ups of Yukie's hands show blisters and her arms are dirtied by the earth. Yukie's physical transformation is evident, and as she ploughs the land, she persistently repeats an inner monologue, "I am Noge's wife." Voice-overs from Noge and her father also urge her on as they cite, "I have no regrets," and "With freedom comes responsibility." The naive girl from the city is replaced by a mature and experienced woman.

Yukie's repositioning within the film is not only a transition in place but a transformation of character, a trait that differs from the earlier discussed female protagonist, Hirayama. Yukie's shift from the interior-urban life with her parents, to her exterior-urban life with Noge, leads her to the exterior-village life of everyday farmers. Kurosawa suggests that the freedom that Yukie seeks is achieved in this final phase of life in a rural village. But Yukie's decision to commit herself to this way of life also returns her to the traditional position placed upon women in Japan, where she is obligated to be responsible for her dead husband's parents. Moreover, in returning to a different life, Yukie is placed again within a private domestic sphere as she conforms to the demands placed on a devoted widow. The final turning point for this stage of the film is with Itokawa's arrival in the village in search of Yukie. Itokawa is shocked to discover Yukie's unrecognisable transformation, from a stylish educated young women to a woman who has experienced hardship. In this scene, it is

implied that Itokawa realises that Yukie has changed into a mature and focused woman who is confident in the decisions she has made, one who acknowledges her place in life.

The final phase of the film comes with the end of the war in 1945 when Yukie briefly returns home. Her darkened fingers stroke the keys of her old piano, a contrast to its whiteness. She no longer belongs within the modern sophistication of the middle class urban home of her educated parents. Yukie believes her place is now outside with the village women and farmers. At the end of the film, it is suggested that Yukie has found freedom and confidence in the simpler, yet traditional, life of the village.

Writing in the mid 1970s, Joan Mellen emphasised the scarcity of films such as *No Regrets for Our Youth* as, "it is rare in the cinema of any country that we are permitted to witness a woman experiencing the consequences of political beliefs and social acts."[334] Nagisa Oshima believes that much of the film, which in some ways he admires (for its idealism) is incoherent, but that what gives *No Regrets for Our Youth* "a sense of coherence to the ambiguous narrative of the film is the overall framework of historical contextualisation" provided by the film's opening prologue which reads as follows:[335]

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[334] Mellen, *Waves* 44.

[335] Nagisa Oshima. "*No Regrets for Our* Youth." In, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.120. Despite Oshima's praise for the effectiveness of this opening title to the film, he also claims in the same article that the view expressed in the film that the whole of Kyoto university opposed the interference with intellectual freedom expressed in the arrest of Professor Takigawa, as shown in the demonstrations in the film, was not historically correct, and that criticism of this intervention by the government was made only by members of the Faculty of Law, and that even this Faculty was divided.

> Japanese militarists used the Manchurian Incident as a pretext to press the public for support to invade the Asian mainland. Any opposing ideology was denounced as 'Red'. The Kyoto University Incident was one example of this tactic. Although this film was inspired by that historical event, the characters portrayed herein are entirely fictional.

Certainly *No Regrets for Our Youth* does show a woman experiencing the consequences of political beliefs, as argued by Mellen, and it does focus on important historical events, including resistance to the Japanese authorities. But rather than attempting to make out a case that *No Regrets for Our Youth* is a coherent film with a unified meaning, coherently affirmed at the end, one needs to see this film as a highly compromised film which moves in contradictory directions, particularly at its end, and does not have a strong conception of what a woman can do in the immediate post-war period, even as it affirms and admires Yukie's courage and idealism. The contradictory impulses can be attributed to a number of causes. In the first place, like the Mizoguchi film discussed above, it is a film which is designed to fulfil the expectations of the occupying authorities for a new cinema in Japan. It does this in a number of ways. It shows resistance to Japanese fascism by students before the war, which is repressed; it shows that some activists worked against Japan during the war and suffered as a result; it attempts to provide a new role model for Japanese women in the figure of Yukie who refuses the role of the woman confined to the home, and also joins in resistance to Japanese fascism.

More importantly is the fact that the script for the film was rewritten on the orders of studio bosses for the reason that another film with a similar story was going into production. This may account for the circumspect portrayal of the character of

Noge/Ozaki, where Noge dies in prison at the time of interrogation, but Ozaki was executed for treachery towards the Japanese state during a time of war. As far as I have been able to ascertain the original script by Eijiro Hisaita is lost, and Kurosawa is not specific in his autobiography as to in what way the original script developed and how it was changed. Certainly Yukie's character exemplifies Kurosawa's repeated concern in his films (though usually attached to male characters) that individuals, rather than conforming to society, should be passionate in their desire to make moral decisions and act on what they believe, and that this involves creating a self as a functioning moral agent. However Yukie's moral passion at the end is expressed in her commitment to her husband's parents, a commitment they themselves do not request, and so she conforms in the end to long standing Japanese traditions about commitment to the internal world of the family. After Noge's demise, Yukie is unable to actualise a public political role.

Despite eliding important facts of the life of the woman on whom its story is based, *My Love is Burning* is a film that deals with Japanese history, based on some of the experiences of an actual woman. While *No Regrets for our Youth* uses historical incidents as points of reference, it is not a biographical film in the sense that the Mizoguchi film partly is. Both films show women attempting to achieve some kind of change in society in difficult historical times. In the Kurosawa film the social expectations on the part of at least some groups in society in the Japan of the Meiji period have disappeared in the period of Japanese fascism in the 1930s and 1940s. This means that Yukie's struggle is for her, a more isolated struggle, for there are few points of reference or institutions that might guide a woman in her situation. We should note that neither film is a melodrama of the kind that Mulvey explores,

for both deals with a woman's attempt to engage in a public sphere in an outside world away from the home. Importantly both films reveal their protagonists' attitudes towards and involvement in the politics of the historical period in which they live.

In discussing these Japanese studio films I have been able to correlate phases of the developing narrative with clearly specified and dated historical events. Both *My Love Has Been Burning* and *No Regrets for Our Youth* are clearly structured in this way. However, in my discussion of the next two films, the Indonesian films *Raden Ajeng Kartini* and *Pioneers of Freedom* although they are largely based on history and historical events, dates do not play such a clear role.

The Indonesian Women's Historical Films

The Indonesian women's historical films *Raden Ajeng Kartini* and *Pioneers of Freedom* are set in the Dutch East Indies in a colonial period in which history is controlled by the Dutch colonisers rather than by their colonial subjects, the Indonesian people. The Indonesian women within the two films are placed within a divided public sphere that is significantly different compared to the public sphere in the Japanese films. The public sphere is one where all public discourse has to accept, as a reality, the presence of a colonial regime which controls discourse, which regards itself as superior in race to the people it governs, and so has the right to control the lives of the population in the name of their best interest, and at the same time as having a right to exploit them and their resources. In this society any significant political change is one that can only be with the agreement of the

colonisers, and there are few mechanisms for the indigenous population to effect change.

Curiously in both films, although at certain points dates are given (for example the date of Kartini's birth) by and large the films do not correlate their history in relation to large scale historical events, one reason being that in a colonial regime the colonial subjects are more or less removed from the movement of history. In terms of moments in history the exception in the case of these two films is the communist rising in West Sumatra which broke out on 1 January 1927 and was rapidly suppressed. This rebellion is depicted in some key scenes in the second half of *Pioneers of Freedom*.

The biographical film *Raden Ajeng Kartini* that begins in April 1879 and continues to September 1904, is set at a time in Java when the thought of colonialism coming to an end was scarcely feasible. Javanese opposition to the Dutch had been suppressed with the Javanese defeat at end of the Java War in 1830, and since then, major colonial administrative frameworks had been put in place which included, of course, a permanent military presence. The Dutch governed Java with the cooperation of the Javanese elites, Kartini's own father being a bupati or regent (chief district administrator) at Jepara, a coastal town in North Central Java.

Unlike the two Japanese films discussed in the first half of this chapter, the two Indonesian historical films to be discussed here were not produced within a studio system, but are feature films produced by independent companies, in which the directors of the films, due to their reputations, and their involvement in the scripts, had substantial control over the films. The writer-director of *Raden Ajeng*

Kartini was Sjuman Djaya. Trained at the film school in Moscow in the early 1960s, prior to making *Raden Ajeng Kartini*, Sjuman Djaya had already himself written and directed at least ten films, quite a few of which had won prizes, and he had established himself as one of the two most important directors making films in Indonesia in the 1970s.[336] A film written and directed by Sjuman Djaya only two years before his film about Kartini, *Kabut Sutra Ungu* ('Mist of Purple Silk', 1980), a melodrama (based on a popular novel) about the difficulties experienced (due to social attitudes) by a young widow in Jakarta after the death of her husband in an airline accident, had done exceptionally well at the box office.

The director of *Pioneers of Freedom*, Asrul Sani, had been a scriptwriter and director since the early 1950s and was also known as a poet and short story writer. While not enjoying the exceptional popular success of the kind recently experienced by Sjuman Djaya, Asrul Sani was a respected figure in both the Indonesian film industry and Indonesian society, and *Pioneers of Freedom*, set in West Sumatra in the 1920s, and based on writings by the well known West Sumatran author and Muslim preacher, Hamka, was produced by a company (PT Tati and Sons Jaya Film) owned by a family that originated from West Sumatra.

While the directors of both films had substantial control over the films, having conceived and scripted the films from the beginning, inevitably some compromises needed to be made. *Raden Ajeng Kartini* for example has been criticised for the casting of Yenny Rachman in the role of the national heroine

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[336] Much of the information about the careers of the two directors Sjuman Djaya and Asrul Sani presented here has been obtained from Sinematek Indonesia (ed.) *Apa Siapa Orang Film Indonesia 1926–1928*, Jakarta: Yayasan Artis Film dan Sinematek Indonesia, 1979. (also from Katalog Film Indonesia)

Kartini. But due to the considerable expenses in filming a nearly three hour film biography of Kartini, much of it filmed on location, a popular star was required for the role, and Yenny Rachman had played the central role in Sjuman Djaya's very successful melodrama *Kabut Sutra Ungu*. It might also be noted that in the case of Kartini, the choice of composer for the film, Sudharnoto (who had also worked on *Kabut Sutra Ungu*), resulted in music that is much more conventional than its subject, and orchestrates more predictable audience responses than might be appropriate (even using choirs at points to celebrate Kartini).

Nevertheless, in other regards, due to the control over their films that both these directors had enjoyed, we can regard these films as *auteur* productions rather than as studio films, less influenced by the codes of popular cinema and the conventions of melodrama, than were the works of major auteurs Mizoguchi and Kurosawa working on studio films in occupied Japan shortly after World War Two. In both of these Indonesian historical films the directors have evolved a distinctive style for the presentation of the historical and or biographical material, in a way that – as will be argued below – engages with local cultural and religious values, as well as with history.

***Raden Ajeng Kartini* (1983)**

The following discussion of the historical film *Raden Ajeng Kartini* addresses the life of Indonesian women's emancipationist Raden Ajeng Kartini, whose public profile is based on letters she wrote to Dutch friends, both in Holland and in the colonial capital Batavia (now Jakarta). My discussion of the film argues that while

Kartini was to some extent trapped within the private sphere of the home, nevertheless it was through her letters, and through the contacts she made with official visitors to her father's residency, who were surprised and impressed by her prescience and intellectual alertness, that she entered the public sphere of society. In addition, Kartini's efforts at setting up schools and education for girls formed a legacy for the early feminist movement in Indonesia.

Earlier I emphasised the sense in which colonial subjects lived in a divided public sphere, in which change in the immediate future was difficult to imagine (as expressed in the quotation from Kartini's letters that is used as an epigraph to this chapter). Nevertheless, it is true that at the time Kartini came to adulthood, there was a new, if relatively short lived period in Dutch colonial thinking, known as the period of the Ethical Policy, in which education of the 'natives' began to become an issue to be considered.[337] Indeed Joost Cote has emphasised that early twentieth century Indonesia (namely that between 1901 until 1936) saw "the emergence and articulation of an Indonesian nationalist movement, but equally it was an era of significant cultural change and social upheaval. It was the beginning of a period in which the characteristics of what can be called "modernity" became increasingly apparent."[338]

Born into an aristocratic Javanese family on 21 April 1879, Kartini was the fifth child and second eldest daughter (out of eleven siblings) of RMAA Sosroningrat, the Javanese regent or district administrator at Jepara, who had been appointed to the position in 1881, and whose family had for two generations, like

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[337] Ricklefs, "A Colonial Age." *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1200*. 193, 199-203.

[338] Cote, "Introduction." *Realizing the Dream of R.A. Kartini*. 2.

other Javanese noble (*priyayi*) families, been involved in administrative work for the Dutch. Kartini had an elder sister and brother by the official wife of her father, but she herself together with one older brother, Sosrokartono, and two younger sisters, were born to a secondary wife of her father, Yu Ngasirah, who was not an official member of the family. That Yu Ngasirah was not an official member of the family was signified in her being required to live not in the Residency house, but in an adjacent building.

Kartini had begun writing letters in 1899, at the age of twenty, and her first correspondent was Stella Zeehandelaar, a young Dutch feminist socialist, living in Holland who had commenced correspondence after Kartini wrote a letter to a Dutch feminist magazine making it known that she would like to have a pen friend. Later, in 1900, Kartini began regular correspondence with Rosa Abendanon, the wife of the newly appointed Director of the Department of Education, Religion and Industry in the Dutch colonial administration in the colonial capital Batavia (now Jakarta). All of these letters, both to Stella and to Rosa, were written in the Dutch language. In 1911, seven years after Kartini's death, the Abendanons, collected the letters Kartini had written to her Dutch acquaintances, and after some degree of careful and selective editing, published some of them in a volume entitled, *Door Duisternis Tot Licht* ('Through Darkness to the Light').[339] However, more recent and fuller editions of Kartini's letters written to Stella and to the Abendanons have been compiled and translated into English by Joost Cote.

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[339] Cote, "Introduction." *On Feminism and Nationalism* 15. "Until the first edition of this text [Cote's compilation series] (1995), all English language editions of letters Kartini wrote in Dutch, including these letters to Stella, used the 1921 English language translation by AL Symmers. Originally published under the (inappropriate) title *Letters of a Javanese Princess*, it included most of the letters included in the original Dutch edition of *Door Duisternis Tot Licht.*" 18.

In the letters, Kartini describes herself as an early feminist whose concerns were not only with education but with the liberation of women, particularly of Javanese women from Javanese traditions. Kartini's rejection and frustration with the Javanese aristocratic and courtly culture is revealed as early as the second paragraph in her first letter to Stella when she writes,

> …century-old traditions, which cannot be broken so readily, hold us firmly cloistered in their arms. One day, certainly, those arms will let us go, but that time still lies a long way off – so infinitely far away! It will come, I know, but not till three, four generations after us! Oh, you cannot know what it is like to love this present, this new age, your age, with heart and soul, while, at the same time, be still bound hand and foot, chained to the laws, practices and customs of one's land from which it is impossible to escape.[340]

Kartini, in her many letters, addresses a number of concerns such as her rejection of colonialism and a demand for access to Western learning and technology, for both Javanese men and women.[341] But we should note that in this letter extracted above, and in others, Kartini was especially critical of aspects of Javanese tradition, and particularly the way it impacted on girls and women. Kartini was also critical of some Islamic practices, for example the insistence in Java on memorizing the Koran without translating it, and also the right of men to have more than one wife or "as many as he wished."[342] Educated in the Dutch language, Kartini was introduced to various forms of Dutch knowledge that enabled her to communicate and correspond

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[340] Kartini's letter to Stella Zeehalender in Joost Cote, *On Feminism* 23.

[341] Cote, "Introduction." *On Feminism* 9.

[342] Kartini's letters to Stella Zeehalender in Jooste Cote, *On Feminism* 56-58.

effectively with Dutch administrators and friends. In addition, while Kartini opposed arranged marriages, ultimately, through family pressure and the pressure of Javanese aristocratic tradition, she herself ended up in an arranged marriage, and this occurred after hopes of furthering her education in Holland disappeared. Tragically, on 17 September 1904, at the age of only twenty five, Kartini died, a few days after giving birth to a son, the offspring of an arranged marriage into which she had been reluctant to enter.

Sjuman Djaya's film *Raden Ajeng Kartini*, through its frequent use of voice-overs accompanying scenes which begin with shots of her writing, utilizes quotations from Kartini's letters, as a method of articulating some of her important views. But the film itself is also based on a noted Indonesian biography of Kartini, written by Sitisoemandari Soeroto and published in 1977, five years before the film was made.[343] Soeroto's biography is notable for the way it attempts to get behind the letters and correlate together the facts of Kartini's life, not only by using the letters themselves, but other available material, including interviews with members of Kartini's surviving family and with other people who knew her. The Soeroto biography of Kartini has been seen by one Western scholar as typical of the era in which it was written, the New Order period, when Indonesia was controlled by President (former General) Suharto, a Javanese, in that it attempts to see Kartini as the direct inheritor of numerous Javanese traditions.[344] Nevertheless, the Soeroto biography is perspicacious in the way it traces the impact of various factors on Kartini's life, particularly the highly ambiguous role played by Abendanon and his

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[343] Sitisoemandari Soeroto. *Kartini: sebuah Biografi*, Jakarta: Gunung Agung, 1977.

[344] Rutherford, Danilyn. "Unpacking a National Heroine: Two Kartinis and Their People." *Indonesia*. Vol. 55, The East Indies and the Dutch (Apr., 1993), 23-40. 23.

wife, who encouraged Kartini's interest in furthering her own education and experience of life, but ultimately prevented her from going to Holland to get that education and wider experience. Sjuman Djaya's film uses a narrative trajectory that is similar to that found in the Soeroto biography.

Like Attenborough's *Gandhi*, Sjuman Djaya's film is an epic film, largely, but not entirely, based on the numerous known facts of its protagonist's life. Hence it is a film that is distinctive in its use of an immense amount of biographical detail. Also, unlike the Japanese films, that are divided into four clear phases or periods, the organisation of the film *Raden Ajeng Kartini* is more dispersed, the biographical details taking precedence over efficient and dramatic narrative structure. Broadly speaking, Sjuman Djaya's film can be analysed into at least six phases, and these phases reflect major periods in Kartini's life rather than being always based on dramatic turning points in the evolution of the heroine's quest, or on important and identifiable dates in public history, as occurs in the Japanese films discussed. As a result, analysis of the narrative structure of the film is inevitably more subjective, for divisions could theoretically be made at a number of points.

Clearly the first phase depicts Kartini's infancy and early childhood as she grows up within her family of Javanese nobility, where she is depicted as influenced by many Javanese traditions. This first section of the film also foreshadows an important subsequent concern of Kartini's, for in this section we see the baby Kartini handed over by her mother, Yu Ngasirah, to Raden Ayu Muryam, the official wife of Sosroningrat, so that Kartini can become an official member of the family, which Yu Ngasirah herself cannot be. A second phase of the film can be identified as the child Kartini, at about the age of nine, begins to become more conscious of the world

around her, and this section is distinctive in the repeated use it makes of close ups of Kartini's eyes, as a way of emphasizing her point of view, and hence of her growing awareness.

A third phase concentrates on Kartini's adolescence and focuses on the period of her confinement, where as the daughter of an aristocratic Javanese family she was confined to the home from about the age of puberty onwards, until, according to tradition, she was expected to enter an arranged marriage, usually at a very early age. Kartini is taken out of society and confined to the home or to certain places in the home where she would not have contact with outsiders. Kartini endures a total of six years in seclusion – her own beginning in 1892 until 1896 and an additional two years accompanying her younger sisters. In the film the actual period of confinement is given only about 8 minutes of screen time (though there is seven minutes of family debate about it before it begins) and in the film this space of confinement is represented by her bedroom, which she describes both in her letters and in the film, as 'a box'. But it is in this eight-minute sequence of Kartini mainly confined to her room that scenes of letter-writing commence, initially in correspondence with the daughter of a Dutch Assistant-Resident in Jepara, Letsy, with whom earlier Kartini had attended school.

In the film the beginning of the process of letter writing (which became so important later), and the period of confinement are combined, for the trauma of confinement is expressed in the film via some of her letters. This experience so dominates her later correspondence (it is described in detail in her first letter to Stella) that we sense the formative impact the period of confinement had in stiffening her resistance to many Javanese and Islamic traditions that discriminated against

women. So it is in this period of confinement that Kartini began to develop her personal and political thought and particularly a concern to liberate women from repressive patriarchal traditions.

These second and third phases of the film also focus on two elements of Kartini's own life: the first, are influences that Kartini gains from her Dutch education and experiences, particularly the influence of the wife of an Assistant Resident in Jepara, Mme Ovink Soer. Kartini is introduced by Mme Ovink Soer to various writing critical of colonial policy, notably those by Dutch writer, Eduard Douwes Dekker (1820-1887) who as a writer took the 'native' name of Multatuli. Dekker's writings, particularly the novel *Max Havelaar*, first published in 1860, were a major influence in the development of the Ethical Policy, this influence being achieved through the guilt his writings created among Dutch progressives. In the film Kartini is also shown as being introduced to feminist writings, especially those by the early Indian feminist writer Pandita Rumabai (1858-1922).[345] The film therefore not only highlights the work of Kartini, but introduces its late twentieth century Indonesian audiences to nineteenth century traditions of feminist thought, both in Europe and in colonised countries.

A second influence in Kartini's life at this point is her brother, Sosrokartono. As Kartini is released from confinement with her sisters, the film cuts to show how Sosrokartono delivering a fork-tongued (courteous but provocative) speech at the 1899 Congress of the Netherlands Linguistic and Anthropological Society in Gent. Aspects of this speech are first heard and then narrated by Kartini as she reads the

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[345] Pandita Ramabai was an Indian Christian social reformer and female activist.

speech in a local newspaper with her mother and younger sisters as they are inspired by the sentiments in Sosrokartono's speech (which was about the spread and maintenance of the Dutch language and its effects on the Javanese).[346] The end of confinement and Sosrokartono's speech of 1899 marks the commencement of a fourth major phase of the film, showing Kartini's growing activities in the public life of Jepara. She attends meetings with Dutch people visiting Jepara, and through her growing correspondence with Stella in Holland and with the Abendanon's in Batavia and ends with her decision not to go to Holland. The fifth phase of the film begins after the defeat of Kartini's hopes of going to Holland, and after this she opens a women's school in her home, but due to family pressure and an overriding sense of her responsibilities to her father, accepts an offer of marriage which ultimately leads to her death. The last section of the film, running itself for nearly an hour, deals with her marriage and the various situations she encounters after she marries, such as her discovery that her husband keeps mistresses, and an attempt by her to alter the position of her birth mother in her father's family. Each of these issues is an extended subsection within the narrative, each of them dealt with independently and assuming the role of a separate parable. It is not possible to divide the film *Raden Ajeng Kartini* into a three or four act structure, for the density of the biographical material presented, and the parable-like approach to some of the issues, particularly in the last hour, are too much to be subjected to a simple dramatic structure or to a structure organised around known historical phases. In some regards, the biographical film *Raden Ajeng Kartini* breaks the boundaries of film drama, which

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[346] Cote, *On Feminism* 46, 143. The speech was entitled, *The Dutch Language in the Indies*. A copy of his speech can be found in the Appendix.

may be one reason many have found it a difficult film to view. While Attenborough's *Gandhi* truncates the later years of the Mahatma's life, Sjuman Djaya in the concluding hour of his film expands on problematic situations surrounding Kartini.

Raden Ajeng Kartini avoids melodrama through its refusal of pace, the film developing slowly and with an emphasis on the process of perception itself, as Kartini is shown coming to see and to witness anomalies and injustices in the world around her, eventually developing an understanding that issues of injustice and discrimination are structural, based on longstanding and prescribed traditions, and not just haphazard or random or arising from individual whim. Additionally, for Sjuman Djaya the slow sedate pace of Javanese tradition imposes a rhythm on his film that would partly preclude melodrama. Moreover, the use of letters being read in measured tone at some length also imposes a kind of rationality to large sections of the film.[347]

The emphasis on Kartini as an increasingly engaged perceiver of the world around her begins in the second phase of the film, a transitionary phase, as Kartini grows from an unknowing child, accepting the world around her, to one who starts to see things for herself and to make judgements about what she sees. Here Sjuman Djaya evokes Kartini as a female subject through extreme close ups of her eyes that commence a number of separate scenes in which the young girl, Kartini, registers anomalies, one of these scenes being an encounter with a little peasant girl Iyem, who is forced to sell hay to buy food for her family – herself, her younger siblings,

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[347] Discussion on Kartini and Javanese cultural traditions is attributed to David Hanan in his unpublished work on Indonesian cinema.

her baby sister and her mother, all abandoned by the husband-father. Kartini eventually arranges for this girl to get some work in the household, encouraging her and other such young women to find employment, by training them in the production of *batik* cloth. The film thus traces a process in Kartini of perception, analysis and action, seeing this as a pattern in her life and as exemplary and important for the viewer to comprehend as something, which in its persistence, was exceptional about her. Indeed towards the end of the film, Kartini, when finding that her husband has mistresses and these are the three maids assisting in the household, is presented in the film as challenging her husband about this, and describing the problems as a problem of the Javanese 'system', and that it is the system itself that needs to be changed and not just individual behaviour. While these kinds of sentiments are expressed in Kartini's letters in general terms, and she may well have challenged her husband about his mistresses, her letters provide no evidence that she ever did so, for to disclose such personal information about her family could only have been regarded as indiscreet. So Sjuman Djaya takes liberties in his representation of Kartini, with the justification, presumably, that some of the actions he depicted Kartini as taking, although there was no evidence of them actually occurring, were what her letters really aimed to express.

Nevertheless there are tensions in the style and dramatic modes of the film *Raden Ajeng Kartini*. In the first scene in the film, ceremonies surrounding the birth of a Javanese child are shown, not only as a way of recording a tradition of respect for the child, but of giving a sacred status to the figure of the infant Kartini. Subsequently in the early scenes in the film showing the context of her early life, other Javanese traditions and aspects of history are featured: a painting of the anti-

colonial Javanese Prince Diponegoro, a gamelan orchestra, Javanese dance, and sounds of wayang puppetry. As noted earlier, in Soeroto's biography whole chapters were devoted to establishing a view that Kartini was the inheritor of many Javanese traditions, stemming back even to earlier Javanese empires such as Majapahit, a view that has been critiqued as exaggerated, a part of the New Order ideology and practice of Javanisation.[348] To some extent Sjuman Djaya echoes Soeroto's views in his brief invocation of Javanese traditions early in the film, but his placing of Kartini within certain Javanese traditions is not nearly so explicit or elaborated as in the biography. Later in the film, repressive elements of Javanese culture (the requirement that daughters of aristocratic families undergo years of confinement in their homes until they are married to a husband selected by their parents) are critiqued by Kartini in her letters. The effect of the film in this regard is to give definition to the ambiguities of tradition within a repressive Javanese aristocratic culture, at once critiquing the prohibitions and restrictions which caused Kartini so much pain, and at the same time preserving a sense of respect for Javanese culture and for some of its traditions, just as Kartini continued to love and respect her family, and particularly her father, who is also shown at times to be severe towards her. This sense of almost stifling respect at times makes cumbersome the film's approach to its subject, electing as it does to adopt an epic scale and show the whole of her life rather than only a portion of it. While the opening scene of the film establishes a sense of respect for the child and for its potential, because it is Kartini who is the child, an ennobling effect is part of the film's opening moments, particularly in the ennobling music, including a

[348] See the article by: Rutherford, Danilyn. "Unpacking a National Heroine: Two Kartinis and Their People." *Indonesia*. Vol. 55, The East Indies and the Dutch (Apr., 1993), 23-40.

choir, that is used at this point. And the term hagiographic may be regarded as a not inappropriate way of describing some of the connotations of this scene.

Although Kartini does emerge from confinement and become a person of note within the short time frame of her life, she always remains trapped within the home: either her family's home or the home of her husband, and this gives the film an element of claustrophobia. This is in marked contrast with the situations of the women in the Japanese films, who have a life beyond the parental home, however thwarted and troubled their destinies become. But it is through her letters that Kartini enters the public sphere, as her thoughts and ideas are shared with the outside world through the mediation of her Dutch friends. Kartini's position in the public sphere can be considered more advanced than most of her female and male contemporaries, as her letters will later influence a wide group of readers, especially women. In this way Kartini came to be a national heroine in Indonesia, and her birthday, 21 April, for some years (including those in which the film was made), was celebrated as Indonesian women's day, though in more recent years while Kartini is remembered in Indonesia, Indonesian women's day is no longer celebrated on Kartini's birthday.

Kartini's life, however, took on new dimensions when on 8 August 1900, she met Jacques Abendanon, the new Director of the Department of Education, Religion and Industry and his wife Rosa. Abendanon and his wife become a major influence in Kartini's life as they shared similar ideals. The Abendanon's had a liberating influence on Kartini as they were open to her views on education and women's rights. By April 1902, however, Kartini's life begins to take on a new direction again, as through the efforts of her pen friend in Holland, Stella, and particularly of Henry Van Kol, a Dutch parliamentarian who had met Kartini at the Residency in

Jepara in 1902 while he was on a study tour of the colonies. Van Kol had been impressed by her, and Kartini and her sister were offered, by the Dutch government in Holland, scholarships to further their studies there, and this was known even to the Dutch king. This period of Kartini's life in retrospect can be seen as a key turning point, as Kartini's future was determined by the next few crucial decisions she makes. This crucial period of her life is narrated stage by stage in the film, in a way that parallels the extensive analysis of this period to be found in Soeroto's biography, where the motivations of the various protagonists, especially the Abendanons, are explored at length. Strangely, Rosa Abendanon persistently begins to dissuade and discourage Kartini from going to Holland. When Rosa's attempts fail, Jacques Abendanon departs Batavia, arriving in Jepara on 24 January 1903 with the aim of persuading Kartini not to go to Holland.

In this scene, that acts as a turning point in the narrative, the film reveals how Abendanon carefully draws Kartini away from the house, to the beach, and so intentionally separates Kartini from her father and her sisters who may interfere in the conversation. On the beach, Abendanon presents his arguments as to why she should not go to Holland, presenting numerous grounds. He describes the hardships that Kartini will face should she decide to go to Holland. He emphasises the negative impressions that she would draw from the Javanese people, for on her return from Holland, he suggests, she would be marked as an educated 'Dutch lady'. He reminds her that her father's health is not good and insists that her departure for Holland will worsen it. Abendanon, in the end, manages to convince Kartini to stay in Jepara and continue her studies in Batavia. But, it is Kartini herself who makes the final decision and decides not to go. However, the important question is why Kartini decided not to

go to Holland when she would have been the first Javanese woman who was offered the possibility of doing so, not by local colonial authorities in Batavia, but by the Dutch government itself, in the Hague. The film dramatises the unfolding of this scene of persuasion and exhortation on the beach, using as its source a summary of the arguments Abendanon used, which Kartini later gave in a letter to Abendanon's son, and which Soeroto discusses in detail in her biography.[349] The film makes it clear that Abendanon manipulated Kartini, ensuring that he could speak to her alone and without interruption, by taking her to the beach, and by getting her to commit herself to the decision that he all but imposes on her, a decision which once she had conveyed it to Dutch authorities, would hardly have been appropriate to then retract. As compensation for her inability to study in Holland, Abendanon offers her a place to continue her studies in Batavia, one that she gladly accepts. But because Abendanon then delayed and took more than six month to organize financial support for her to study in Batavia, by the time Kartini was awarded the scholarship it was too late—her father had received (and accepted) a request from the regent in neighbouring Rembang for her hand in marriage. Tragedy upon tragedy befalls Kartini not because the film is structured as melodrama or tragedy, but because her life ultimately became a chain of events that had tragic consequences, after she made the decision, under pressure, not to accept the invitation to go to Holland.

Kartini's entry into her married life marks the final phase of the film as she falls into the role of a regent's wife, caring for his children and running his household. Kartini refuses to conform to the role of the traditional wife and sets a number of rules for her husband to obey, the primary one being that he is not allowed

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[349] Soeroto, *Kartini* 281-283.

to have mistresses. His failure to comply causes Kartini to declare that she no longer trusts him in all matters, allowing her to focus on her dream of opening her school for girls. She moves from principle to action. Her disappointment in her husband causes her to seek alternatives to ensure the better treatment of women, and one of those alternatives was to open her school for girls.

One significant scene that also suggests Kartini's efforts at improving the position of women is where she addresses problems of the position of women in her own family. The scene, a dinner scene, reaches its culmination in a shot that recalls the composition of figures within Leonardo Da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper* (1495-1498). This painting appears three times within the film.

Image 5: *The Last Supper* (1495-1498) by Leonardo Da Vinci

In the dinner scene, Kartini persuades her father to invite her birth mother, Ibu Ngasirah, to join the family for dinner, a request with which he complies. In doing this she symbolically restructures relationships in her own family, at least for a time, giving her mother the status and position to which she should be entitled. To symbolise this, Kartini suggests that the seating arrangements be changed so that all

chairs are aligned on one side of the table in one continuous line, as in the Da Vinci painting. As Kartini sits in the middle of the table, flanked by her father and Ibu Ngasirah, a glow of light forms around her head, suggesting a halo. The shot is composed in such a way that Kartini herself is placed in a position similar to that of Christ in the Da Vinci painting. In emulating *The Last Supper*, the shot also suggests that the meal that Kartini has with her family at Jepara may be her last one that she shares with them, thus foreshadowing her death. The events depicted in the scene are symbolic rather than events that actually occurred.

Image 6: Dinner Scene in *Raden Ajeng Kartini* (1983)

The composition of this shot of the family at the dinner table is one where Kartini and her family are placed within a horizontal relationship, possibly symbolising an element of equality between them all. The symbolic meaning of the scene as a whole is that Kartini able to persuade society (in her father and her family) into accepting and creating a new perception towards woman (in accepting her mother as an equal). This shot of an Indonesian ‘Last Supper’ suggests Kartini has a power that is similar to that to Christ, and even that in some sense she attained sainthood before her death. However, while some may think that this link to Christ is acceptable, others

may object to it. For some Javanese this scene is intrusive, for it can only work by invoking Christian stories and images, and in this sense it can be argued that it is intrusive in the context of Islamic Java.[350] But there is another way in which Kartini's life parallels that of Christ. Kartini died young and as a result, unintentionally created a new 'testimony' through her letters.

Among all the films about women discussed in this chapter, *Raden Ajeng Kartini* is the clearest example of that sub-genre of the modern historical epic which, by and large, pins it narrative to numerous known historical or biographical details. Kartini's entire life is mapped out within the film with its numerous turning points of failure, successes and conflicts both internal and external. There is a complexity in the sort of divided public sphere that Kartini enters. Unlike Hirayama in *My Love Has Been Burning*, Kartini did not see a married life or emotional relationships with men as an important element in her life. The social contexts where women are placed in these films are different. Due to restrictions on social interaction within aristocratic Javanese families, Kartini appears not to have had many male acquaintances aside from her father and brothers, and the sons of her mentors. This is much more the result of cultural notions, rather than of personal choice. Even her relationships with older men were with mentors, such as in her relationship with Abendanon. Culturally, there was no possibility of her running off with a man, or running to pursue her dreams (like Yukie) because it was not part of aristocratic Javanese culture at the time. Yet while Kartini had limited contact with men prior to her marriage, she becomes unavoidably trapped in an arranged marriage. And though

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[350] The comments came from a group of Indonesian students after a screening of the film in September, 2009.

she finds a comrade in her husband, one who fights for the same ideals of justice and equality, he too fails to meet her expectations of a man.

Kartini's life in many ways is an extreme case of Mulvey's vision of a woman trapped within the home. Yet Kartini's presence in the public sphere is facilitated, via her own initiatives, through her letters and her correspondence with the outside world, though admittedly much of her impact occurred with the publication of some of her letters a few years after her death. The private sphere within which Kartini is trapped becomes a place for her to come to terms with her thoughts, ideas and even some acceptance of her situation. Kartini is shown by the film to move out into the public sphere through her letter writing and through fulfilling her pedagogical aims, and also in the creation of schools for girls and the entrepreneurship of local tradecrafts. Had Kartini not died at such a young age, she would have entered the public sphere forcefully as a champion for women's rights.

***Pioneers of Freedom* (1980)**

In contrast to the portrait of the aristocratic Kartini, *Pioneers of Freedom* highlights the actions taken by a comparatively obscure woman, in the fictional character, Halimah, as she seeks the right under Islamic law to free herself from her irresponsible husband, who no longer lives with her and will not support her, but refuses to divorce her. The film is set in West Sumatra in the 1920s, its narrative commencing in the capital of Padang, on the coast, but with important scenes set in the highland town of Padang Panjang, a town in the region of the ethnic group, the Minangkabau, with their unique matrilineal culture. The 1920s is a period which saw

increasing opposition towards Dutch colonial rule, culminating in a short lived communist rebellion in early 1927. Increasing opposition to the Dutch also came from Islamic modernists, also known as *kaum muda* ('young men'):

> In the beginning of the 1900's, the Islamic modernist movement began spreading its influence in West Sumatra. Launched by religious scholars (*ulama*) who had been influenced by new intellectual trends in the Middle East, the movement was directed at the purification of prevailing religious practices and also at using Islam as a basis for social change. In the process, the movement generated religious and social conflicts which lasted for almost two decades. The Islamic modernist scholars, known as the *Kaum Muda* ulama, eventually dominated Minangkabau social and political movements.[351]

The film commences in 1926, the year prior to the communist rising in West Sumatra. The story is based on a few pages from Sumatran author, Hamka's biography of his father, *Ajahku*, published originally in 1950.[352] The film's writer-director, Asrul Sani, loosely adapted from this biography the story of a woman named Kani, who is placed in the same situation with regard to her husband, as is Halimah in the film. In the biography, the section on which the film is based is a

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[351] Taufik Abdullah. "Introduction." *School and Politics: the Kaum Muda Movement in West Sumatra (1927-1933)*. New York: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Cornell University, 1971. 8.

[352] At the opening of the film there is an inscription to the effect that the film is based on Hamka's novel *Di Bawah Lindungan Kaabah*. In fact only two minor characters from this novel appear in this film. The passage from Hamka's biography *Ayahku* on which the film is really based, has been identified by David Hanan. See David Hanan "Traditions Minangkabau, réforme Islamique et droits de la femme dans deux films de la fin de la période coloniale a Sumatra-Ouest" (Minangkabau Traditions, Islamic Reform and the Rights of Women in Two Films Set in Late Colonial West Sumatra). *Le Banian* 3, (June, 2007): 53-72 and Hamka [Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah]. "Nikah Si Kani." *Ajahku: Riwajat Hidup Dr. H. Abd. Karim Amrullah dan Perdjuangan Kaum Agama di Sumatera.* 3rd ed. Djakarta: Djajamurni, 1967. 113-115.

brief but broadly true report of a situation faced by Hamka's father, who was an Islamic preacher in Padang Panjang, and who encountered many women facing such a predicament, and who wanted to reject their religion. In the biography Hamka's father solved the problem by making local rules that allowed the women to divorce their husbands. In the biography, most of these women are peasant women and the initiative comes from the *imam* (an Islamic leader) himself, Hamka's father. In the film, it is Halimah, the gentle but forceful and assertive female protagonist who seeks her own solution to her predicament, by requesting a progressive Islamic preacher to make a judgement on the matter.

The reworking of the story in the film in such a way as to create a strong central female character need some explanation prior to analysing the film. This is because there is a significantly different cultural and historical context in West Sumatra. Joel S. Kahn describing the cultural/political differences between the Javanese, and the Minangkabau:

> Javanese traditionalism and Minangkabau modernism represent contrasting responses to Dutch colonial rule, stemming from the differential impact of colonial policies in Java and in West Sumatra. But others have maintained that Minangkabau itself has strong modernist traditions, established outside of the framework of Dutch colonialism.[353]

While the Minangkabau constitute the world's largest matrilineal people, the Minangkabau are equally well-known for their strong adherence to Islam and their

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[353] Kahn, Joel S. "The Interpretation of Minangkabau Culture: Traditions of Modernity or Modernist Traditions?" *Constituting the Minangkabau: Peasants, Culture and Modernity in Colonial Indonesia*. Providence: Berg, 1993. 2.

modern and outward looking perspectives.[354] Not only are many Minangkabau considered as Islamic modernists but, as Kahn suggests, the Minangkabau made a unique contribution to the Indonesian nationalist movement. In addition, taking into account elements of village based societies, another key feature of Minangkabau social organisation is the practice of consensus, of *mufakat*, that stresses the "equal opportunity of all to play a role in decision-making."[355]

Kahn states that while the Minangkabau played a significant role in the struggles at both regional and national levels, Minangkabau nationalists differed from their Javanese counterparts in significant ways. For example, Kahn perceives that in West Sumatra the independence movement represented a merging of two cultural currents, one Islamic and the other nationalist.[356] Kahn shows how the religious and political leaders in West Sumatra embraced Islam and nationalism as equally important elements in the anti-Dutch struggle, contending that religion could not be separated from the political movement.[357] Kahn further suggests that there were also women's organisations in West Sumatra at the time. The main focus of these women's organisations were largely on 'modernist projects' where they "embraced the view that gender differences were themselves a product of tradition, and needed therefore to be superseded in a genderless modern world."[358]

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[354] Thomas, Lynn L. and Benda-Beckmann, Franz von. Eds. "Themes and Issues." *Change and Continuity in Minangkabau: Local, Regional, and Historical Perspectives on West Sumatra.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985. 1.

[355] Kahn, *Constituting the Minangkabau*. 4.

[356] Kahn, *Constituting the Minangkabau*. 115.

[357] Kahn, *Constituting the Minangkabau* 114-121.

[358] Kahn, *Constituting the Minangkabau*. 185.

Significantly *Pioneers of Freedom* employs the point of view of a female protagonist in depicting the emerging nationalist movement.

The image of Minangkabau society as a society whose intellectuals had a close attachment to both modernist Islam and to the nationalist movement is a fundamental element in any analysis of *Pioneers of Freedom.* The film is a double plot film, with the dilemma of the central protagonist, Halimah, intersecting with the anti-colonial movement of the Islamic modernists or *kaum muda*. The film follows these political developments as a plot line that exists autonomously from the story of Halimah. At different times these plot lines intersect (via Halimah's acquaintance with Hamid, a young man who is involved in the anti-colonial movements taking place, a disciple of the progressive Haji Wali based in Padang Panjang), and diverge, as when the communist rebellion is put down and subversion of the colonial state, for some, comes to take another form, such as via the education and politicisation of women.

While a key event – the communist rising in West Sumatera on 1 January 1927 – marks the years key events in the film take place, no other dates are used as historical markers within the film. The film's credits, at the beginning, sets up the historical context of the narrative with a montage of archival photographs of Russia's defeat of Japan at Port Arthur in 1904. Noting that this defeat of a Western power by an Asian nation gave Asian people hope that the colonial regimes at that time holding sway over many Asian nations could be defeated, the film goes on to present the situation in West Sumatra in the mid-1920s. The figures in the archival photographs, mostly of people from the early 1920s, include youthful Indonesian revolutionaries such as Sukarno who figures prominently. The prologue of the film

introduces the protagonist, Halimah, who is behind bars. In a monologue, the idealistic Halimah remains hopeful about the future, as she expresses how she has been witness to the changing socio-political situation of the nation at that moment in time.

After the opening prologue, analysis of the film's narrative structure can be divided into five sections. The first section of the film establishes Halimah's efforts at emancipating herself from her husband. Her actions lead to her sending a letter to the Islamic preacher, Haji Wali, in Padang Panjang, seeking his help. The second section develops a portrait of Haji Wali, as a leader of the modernists in Padang Panjang and depicts his relationship with his disciples. On receiving Halimah's letter, Haji Wali affirms he will help her, by holding a mufakat or Islamic conference to debate her situation. Not all of his student agree with this proposal. The third section of the film concentrates on issues around the organisation of the mufakat, but this is paralleled by Halimah's preparations to renounce Islam, as the only means of freeing herself from her husband's power over her. Halimah's success at emancipating herself from her husband is the climax of this third section of the film. In the fourth section of the film the communists in the region stage their rebellion and many are killed or forced to flee, including some students of Haji Wali. Not long after this, taking a different political approach, Halimah begins to establish women's support groups in her village. In the final phase of the film, with the arrests of Haji Wali and members of the modernist movement, Halimah takes on the role of a strong advocate for resistance to the Dutch, and she continues the nationalist campaign, an action that ultimately results in her own arrest.

As mentioned, the first section of the film establishes the situation in the coastal town of Padang. The film shows Halimah attending a *khutbah* or sermon by Islamic modernist, Haji Jalaludin, in a crowded mosque. This scene sets up a number of issues – Halimah's presence within the public sphere of the mosque and the position of the Islamic modernists who, while free to preach and address the public, are under severe scrutiny by local Dutch officials. Halimah's attempt to seek council from Haji Jalaludin fails, as he is arrested by the authorities for being seditious. The film only highlights Halimah's predicament with her husband upon her return home where she encounters her bullying husband, Sidi. Sidi accuses Halimah of *nusyuz* (where the wife is accused of misbehaviour and the husband does not have to live with or financially support the wife), and is unwilling to divorce her. From this point on, the film in a way dynamises Halimah's character, as Halimah is presented as active and methodical in her efforts to annul her marriage. Halimah initially seeks advice from the local imam, Haji Makmur, but is unable to receive a sympathetic hearing. This results in her writing a letter to Haji Wali asking for his help.

While the film sets up Halimah's conflict within the first section of the film, it also simultaneously sets up the second plot line of the film through the characters, Hamid and Zainab, as well as Hamid's early ties with the Islamic modernists. Hamid and Zainab represent the younger generation of society. Both Hamid and Zainab have been educated in Dutch controlled schools, but at the end of their studies take different paths. Hamid chooses to join Haji Wali and the modernists in Padang Panjang after declining to work at a Dutch bank, whereas Zainab is expected to stay home to learn to cook and sew. While the film may have attempted to play on the melodramatic potentialities in the relationship between Hamid and Zainab, this is

overshadowed by the political changes that are simultaneously taking place, and the relationship is influenced by the political decisions that Hamid makes. Moreover, the film avoids emotionality as Halimah's actions as the film's leading protagonist are guided by systematic and calculated reasoning on her part. In Halimah's attempt to emancipate herself from her husband, no romantic inclinations arise. The climax of this first phase of the film occurs during Hamid's journey to Padang Panjang, where, upon harassment from local Dutch authorities on board the train, Hamid meets two disciples of Haji Wali, Fakhrudin and Zainuddin, and joins them on their journey to Padang Panjang.

The second phase of the film introduces Haji Wali and the modernists meeting in a mosque at Padang Panjang. In receiving Halimah's letter explaining her predicament and her request to divorce her husband, Haji Wali shows his support by appointing Hamid and Fakhrudin to investigate Halimah's problem. There are however, objections from a few disciples, especially Zainuddin, who displays a more radical attitude, suggesting that there are more important and bigger issues to deal with rather than the troubles of one woman. Haji Wali nevertheless disagrees and believes that their role is to help everyone, especially women such as Halimah. Upon Hamid's meeting with Halimah, in which Zainab too is in attendance, a sisterly bond is formed between the trio. While Hamid attempts to help Halimah find a solution to her problem, Halimah teaches Zainab the skills of sewing. As time passes and Halimah has yet to receive word from Haji Wali, the second section of the film reaches its climax with Halimah beginning to consider her options, one of them being to renounce Islam.

The third phase of the film revolves around the organisation of the mufakat. As Haji Wali calls for the mufakat to discuss Halimah's request, Hamid and his colleagues attempt to gain the cooperation and support of other imams (Islamic preachers) in the area. However, most of the imams are harassed and threatened by Dutch officials, who try to stop them from attending the mufakat. As the film shows, on the day of the mufakat, as the imams arrive one by one, a truck load of policemen arrive and align in front of the mosque. Undeterred by this show of Dutch colonial power, ten imams enter the mosque to meet with Haji Wali. Simultaneously however, Halimah, at the exact same moment in time decides to renounce Islam. As the mufakat takes place in highland Padang Panjang, the film parallels it with Halimah's departure from her home in coastal Padang to renounce Islam at a local mosque.[359] This third phase of the film climaxes, as the film reaches its half way mark (of an hour), with Halimah's attempted renunciation and sudden reconversion to Islam as well as the simultaneously agreed upon consensus reached by the mufakat meeting led by Haji Wali.

The very style of *Pioneers of Freedom* is one that incorporates Islamic values. One example of this is the sense that religious discipline, certainly within Islam, leads to a purifying of emotions. If the emotions are purified, then emotionality, particularly the amplification of suffering to the point where indulgence in sadness becomes a kind of code of masochistic self abasement, is removed. Although Halimah suffers, the film does not emphasise her suffering either in its depiction of her emotions nor via its music or via dramatic climaxes. Rather,

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[359] The film's conscious and deliberate use of mufakat has been discussed at length in an article by David Hanan. See Hanan *Le Banian 3* 68-69.

Halimah is presented as at all times rational in her attempts to find a means of altering the restrictions placed on her by her husband. In the scene where she walks through the village to the mosque to renounce her religion, her intentions are known to the villagers, who gather along the pathway she takes, jeering her and some stoning her. What is emphasized is Halimah's determination to endure and to fulfil her purpose, rather than a sense that she has been overwhelmed by others or by her own feelings.

As already mentioned, while the imams meet to discuss and solve Halimah's predicament, Halimah heads to the mosque to make a dramatic gesture. In order to break her matrimonial bonds, Halimah chooses to renounce Islam. In the midst of renouncing Islam, Halimah unexpectedly experiences 'divine intervention' in a mystical moment where she realises that her actions are wrong. Halimah's revelation coincides with the convening imams who reach an agreement that Halimah's marriage should be dissolved. At the very moment that Halimah is making a statement intended to renounce Allah, a vision of revelation expresses itself through a voice, through light and through a images of writing on the mosque wall, which are presented as transcendental, originating from beyond the mere human condition. While this is a surprising moment in the film, it is in accord with the view that adherence to Islam is a form of submission to a higher power, which is only partially known, via the Koran.

While the film identifies Halimah's experience in culturally and religiously specific ways, another significant specificity is the film's view of the role of the mosque within the community. The mosque has a unique multi-purpose role. Primarily it is, of course, a place of prayer. But it is also regarded as a social centre

for a community, providing a place for a community to gather and a platform for pronouncements. The mosque therefore, it is claimed by some scholars, is comparable with the Greek agora or the Roman forum.[360] The mosque represents:

> The private and social life of the people and gradually assumed the character of a socio-religious forum. The *maulvis* and *muftis* used to sit in them and issue fatwas (injunctions) on social as well as religious matters. …This brings the people together and promotes social communion and a feeling of brotherhood among them… it also became a seat of learning where scholars could freely assemble.[361]

The mosque features as a significant location approximately five times throughout the film: Haji Jalaludin's first sermon; Haji Wali's meeting with his disciples in Padang Panjang; the mufakat gathering; Halimah entering the mosque to renounce Islam and Halimah preaching nationalist ideals. Not only does the mosque function as a public meeting place where Islamic principles are debated and discussed (such as in the gathering of the mufakat), but also as the place of convergence for the people, a gathering within a public sphere. The public themselves, men and women, gather and form a united consensus as they attempt to understand the new initiatives being taken by the nationalist movement (such as when listening to sermons by the Islamic modernist preachers).

Halimah's life takes a different direction in the fourth section of the film, as with emancipation from her husband, Halimah is now free and independent. This

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[360] Frishman, Martin and Hasan-Uddin Khan. Eds. "Islam and the Form of the Mosque." *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development & Regional Diversity*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994. 32.

[361] R. Nath. "Introduction." *Mosque Architecture (from Median to Hindustan: 622-1654 A.D.)*. Jaipur: The Historical Research Documentation Programme, 1994. 4.

section begins with Halimah successfully establishing women's groups in the village as the film identifies Halimah's efforts in improving the conditions of the village women. She gathers the women and organises numerous women's support groups, such as the 'League of Emancipated Women'. The formation of women's groups at this point in the film suggests the establishment of institutions that support the rights of women. At this stage of the film, I believe that Halimah's character comes to bear a close resemblance to that of a famous West Sumatran feminist of the period, Rasuna Said (1910-1965). Rasuna was an Indonesian Minangkabau nationalist political leader who, like Kartini, fought for equality between men and women.[362] In *Ajahku*, Hamka describes how by 1928 the women's movement had reached the Minangkabau region and women were beginning to become passionate about a number of issues. Rasuna Said's name is mentioned among them.[363] Nevertheless, the film never directly identifies Halimah's activities at this point as a representation of Rasuna Said's community politics, for Halimah is a composite, used to represent a number of issues effecting women at the time. However Susan Blackburn has described the position and the role of women during this period of the Islamic nationalist movement:

> During the colonial period, then, the main goal of overtly political Islamic organisations was to undermine or destroy Dutch rule…Women could and did participate in this struggle, both within Islamic political parties and via the women's movement. Their participation had already been authorised in

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[362] Rasuna Said was known as an orator and an Indonesian independence fighter who actively participated in *Sarekat Rakyat* and the Indonesian Muslims Association (PERMI) as she often criticised the cruel and unjust colonial rule of the Dutch. 29 August 2010 <http://www.tokohindonesia.com/ensiklopedi/r/rasuna-said/index.shtml>

[363] Hamka, *Ajahku* 171.

> strongly Islamic areas like Aceh, where women had previously fought against Dutch conquest during the Aceh War.[364]

Each character in the film, at this point, was on the edge of significant historical events. Halimah, having experienced one form of change (from a married woman to an independent woman), now is able to enter into a public sphere which is being transformed by historical forces that ultimately will not be able to be contained. Halimah plays a part in this by mobilising village women into groups to pursue efforts to not only educate each other, but to instil an understanding of their basic rights. It is also the time when Halimah joins forces with the Islamic modernists in their efforts to create awareness among society of the need for sustained opposition towards Dutch colonial rule. While Halimah's initial conflict was in her opposition towards her husband, the emerging nationalist movement ensures that she is placed again in yet another conflicting position, this time against Dutch authority.

In this fourth phase of the film, the characters take up more developed political commitments. For example, aside from the Islamic modernists, communist pockets begin to form and, as the film shows, begin to gather and mobilise peasants and villagers in renewed efforts to oppose the Dutch. However, differences of opinion arise between the modernists and the communist sympathisers (such as between Fakhrudin and Zainuddin), as the communists decide to take physical action against the Dutch, by killing Dutch supporters and destroying property. As Kahn explains, the expansion of the communist movement in West Sumatra in the 1920s was a result of "the association between the PKI and, apparently, traditional forms of

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[364] Blackburn, Susan. "Indonesian Women and Political Islam." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. 39.1 (2008). 83.

anticolonial hostility," and on the eve of the 1 January 1927 communist uprising, "the political agenda was being set by neither Muslim modernists nor Indonesian nationalists, but rather by a seemingly motley collection of traditionalists, populists and Marxists."[365]

The film dramatises this conflicting divide between the modernists and their communist comrades who decide to take up arms against the Dutch. Communist members feet the need to physically oppose the Dutch, the intellectual modernist believe in an approach based on negotiations. Tragically, the brief communist rebellion is crushed, and ends with the death of many fellow comrades. This phase of the film ends with the failure of the communist uprising. Susan Blackburn has commented that after the failure of the 1927 revolt, the communist movement disappeared for the rest of the colonial period. While radicals continued to operate, they were faced with numerous difficulties. At this point in history the role of women too began to change as they committed themselves to the nationalist movement and played a more active role:

> Women became 'political' in the eyes of the colonial authorities, and laid themselves open to the same kind of scrutiny and harassment that male nationalists had to face. After the demise of communism, in Sumatra, it was prominent women in Islamic political parties who were in most danger. A well-known case was that fiery Rasuna Said, a leader of Permi, founded in 1930, which married Islam and nationalism.[366]

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[365] Kahn, *Constituting the Minangkabau* 153, 115.

[366] Blackburn, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 87.

The final phase of the film shows Halimah joining the modernist cause in efforts to stand up against the Dutch. It also depicts the parting of ways between Hamid and Zainab as Hamid consents to Zainab marrying a distant cousin. This parting of ways also signifies the temporary dispersement of the modernists, as Dutch authorities began to assert pressure with the arrests of Haji Wali and other modernist leaders. One effect of this dispersement as represented in the film is the decision of Hamid to leave Padang Panjang for Mekah as a means of ensuring that struggles against the Dutch can be continued. The film's denouement shows Hamid's journey from Padang Panjang to Melaka in Malaya, as he sets out on his long journey to Mekah. Halimah on the other hand, takes the place of the male Islamic modernists and preaches at the mosque, where she too is soon arrested on charges of sedition. As Halimah faces trial, exactly one year after Haji Jalaludin's similar experience, she too is sentenced to two years in jail. As the film draws to a close, Halimah is shown escorted down a long prison corridor, and as her monologue declares – everything that she had done, has been in the name of Allah.

Halimah's as the film's protagonist is not someone of noble birth. Ultimately, the film represents the position of an obscure woman in Indonesia. But like Kartini's, Halimah's struggle is that of the individual against a two-walled system of religion and politics. Halimah's radicalisation from a women trapped in a domestic conflict is transformed into opposition against the oppression and injustice of colonialism. Her initial reliance on men, in the form of the modernists, evolves into one of independence in her own ability to make her own decisions. While Halimah's struggle to emancipate herself from her husband is successful, freedom from colonial dominance is to take much longer. Halimah becomes the voice of change and

resistance during a period when issues of religious and political reform, as well as women's rights, are linked with movements of anti-colonialism and social revolution.

Pioneers of Freedom therefore, expresses not only an individual woman's ability to oppose authority, but also addresses the role of the people in fighting oppressors by taking matters into their own hands. The film's identification with a woman, students, modernists, conservatives and villagers indicate the beginning of nationalism at the grassroots. The importance of generating awareness and the re-education of the populace in line with the needs of the nation are also clearly identified. There is a tradition of female activism within the matrilineal society of Western Sumatra which allows for a different public sphere to emerge as compared to Kartini (who had died some twenty two years before the events depicted in *Pioneers of Freedom*). However, the film is different from the original version as presented in *Ajahku* resulting in a different kind of woman and a different kind of public sphere because in the original version, the women, mainly illiterate villagers, did not fight for themselves. What we see in the film is the result of amalgamating in the character and circumstance of Halimah, the plight of village women oppressed by their husbands, and the radical politics of the later emerging figure, Rasuna Said.

The discussion of the two Indonesian films brings attention to the notion that women of the modern period were no longer dependent on men as a means of survival. As demonstrated by both Kartini and Halimah they were capable of finding means (in their different ways) of gaining independence and emancipation from the men in their lives. Even though the future outcomes of their efforts remain unclear or tragic, for Kartini dies before her dreams become a reality, and Halimah is imprisoned, the women realise that they need to take matters into their own hands in

order to achieve change. The women's changing position within the public sphere is exemplified as both women become more assertive and each, in different ways, finds a position within the public sphere, and not just in the home.

Pioneers of Freedom cannot be considered a melodrama because it takes into account the life of an active woman in Halimah as she seeks out strategies of emancipating herself. Halimah is never seen as a victim, though she is often under attack (first mentally by her husband and later physically by society). But even when she is subject to these various kinds of abuse, she continues to fight against any form of oppression be they men or the colonising Dutch. Halimah never becomes a tragic female victim as she enters history as it is told within this film.

Conclusion

The transition to the modern that begins with the early political feminist movement suggests a progressive transformation as to the position of women within Asian society. Aside from the aristocrat, Kartini, the women in these films are ordinary women who come to play some role in altering the course of history or of thinking in their societies. The circumstances in each film are culturally and historically different. The women's entries into the public sphere all occur at historically significant moments. However, none of the women succeed in completely achieving their ultimate goals. Nevertheless, by being in the public sphere, these women have developed a confidence with regards to their social positions, so they become role models for future Asian women, even though their individual roles within the public sphere differ significantly.

Although the Japanese films are melodramas, or at least have many of the characteristics of melodrama, none of these films can be described as domestic melodramas, for all these films deal with situations where women engage with their societies and try to transform them in a public space. These two films in particular focus their attention on the difficulties Japanese women experience in entering the public sphere of their society. The Indonesian films, which were made at least thirty years after the Japanese films, and not under studio conditions, move beyond melodrama in the way they frame and dramatise the issues. This is partly due to the nature of the heroines whose situations they dramatise, partly due to the fact that to make films with the melodramatic ethos of the 1940s is to return to an earlier style of filmmaking, and also due to the fact that a national heroine such as Kartini is better treated with a monumental style, while the Islamic ideas of restraint and meditation that pervade *Pioneers of Freedom*, and the film's view of activist politics in the colonial period, would preclude representing the figure of Halimah with the stereotyped tropes of victimisation found in much melodrama.

Chapter Six

Concluding Remarks

This thesis has explored in detail fourteen historical films about Asian nations, most made by indigenous production companies and directors from the countries the history of which is represented in the films, but including one film produced as an international co-production. The thesis has concentrated on films from Southeast Asia, but includes extensive discussion of two films made about Indian history and of two films made about Japanese history, one of the Japanese films concerning recent history at the time it was made. The thesis concentrates on the representation of periods of history concerned with national independence, the period of the formation of the nation, and with women's emancipation. One reason for the selection of these topics is that these are quite common concerns in historical films made in Asian countries, particularly in the Southeast Asian region, which is the main focus of the study and which is a region where many countries were colonised at least from the nineteenth century onwards.

In addressing the topic of the historical film, a number of concerns have figured prominently. A primary concern raised by the thesis has been the question of the adequacy of historical films to the representation of the modern history of some of the nations under discussion. This has led into discussions of how the films represent

national struggles, but also how they are discourses engaging with their societies at the time the film was made, and in what ways these films end up supporting or challenging hegemonic views of the nation. The discussion of films about the periods of the national struggle for independence is mainly explored in relation to films about Indian and Malaysian history, in chapters in the first half of the thesis. The second half of the thesis is concerned with the representation of women in history, particularly in struggles for freedom from an oppressive patriarchy, in struggles for women's rights, for emancipation generally and for education. The division of the thesis, in such a way as to spend half of the thesis on the representation of women in historical films, is in accord with priorities in relatively recent Asian historical films, and with my own concern to ensure that women are seen as part of history. The thesis also includes a discussion of the different forms that historical films can take, and how this is often determined by the kinds of historical knowledge and of historical documentation that are available from different periods.

In this conclusion I will briefly summarise the core findings of the thesis but at the same time contextualise these findings in relation to other kinds of scholarship and broad concerns about historical films in these countries.

Often when historical films are released into cinemas, they lead to controversial discussions either in the press, or among polemicists or, eventually, sometimes, among scholars of the history shown in the film or among scholars working in film studies. But in Asian countries, and to some extent elsewhere, historical films, and certainly genuine historical films, are comparatively rare. Before the British director, Richard

Attenborough, made *Gandhi*, no production company had made a feature film about Gandhi's role during the independence period, even in India, despite the richness of this period and of Gandhi's unique contribution to it. Nor has a film been made in India about Gandhi himself in the forty years since the release of Attenborough's film. In Indonesia no feature film has ever been made about the national leader and first president of Indonesia, the charismatic and influential Sukarno, whose impact on Indonesia can still be seen today. In many cases the inhibiting factor, apart from the expense of such a production, is the respect still accorded the leader, or the combination of respect and controversy, surrounding the leader. In Indonesia, of course, daughters and sons of Sukarno are still active in politics or the arts, and whether the inhibition arises from the attitudes of these family members, or from those who oppose the family today, the fact is that historical films rarely get made. Nevertheless one can expect that over time historical films will be made, even if as docudramas made for television, where production values do not need to be so high. This thesis has limited itself to films made for release in cinemas, but clearly more work can be done on historical docudramas made for television. It is my contention that the relatively small number of historical films that do get made constitute a valuable contribution to the public sphere. Here I wish to reiterate what Marcia Landy has written:

> Historical narratives offer individuals and groups a way to assimilate dominant conceptions of the world and, perhaps, to consent to them; more importantly

> what is offered is the opportunity to express an awareness of their conceptual limitations.[367]

One of the reasons for including *Gandhi* and *Sardar* as key films for discussion in this thesis is that these films, whatever their limitations, are works that attempt to narrate, incident by incident, the main outlines of complex histories about which much is known, for this is twentieth century history about which there is a great deal of documentation. Only one historical film made in a Southeast Asian country attempts to represent modern history with anything like the same degree of complexity as these films do, and that is Sjuman Djaya's *Raden Ajeng Kartini*, which deals with a much smaller period of history and is primarily concerned with narrating the life of one person, but narrating it with a great deal of detail. But it is precisely because these films dealing with the comparatively recent past in India, a past where the politics of which still has a great deal of influence in contemporary India, that it is possible to identify the way in which these films work as discourses about the present. Attenborough's *Gandhi*, which received some support from the Indian government, is a film that to some extent might been seen to have advantaged the Congress Party and its continuing reputation in India, with the qualification that in India, ultimately, it was perceived as a foreign work. Additionally, as argued in detail in the thesis, this is a film primarily about satyagraha, non-violent non-cooperation as a major stratagem within a political struggle. Also discussed in this thesis is the way in which *Sardar*, made in 1993, in its portrait of a Congress Party leader's role in intense negotiations in the period of the lead up to

[367] Landy, *Film, Politics, and Gramsci* 123.

independence, was a film that would remind the population of the historical role of the Congress Party in achieving independence, and hence be to the advantage of the Congress Party at a time, the decade of the 1990s, when its pre-eminence in the country was being threatened by the Hindu Nationalist Party, the BJP.

The question of the adequacy of these films to history is an issue that required more research than their relation to the present, and it is a topic about which little really detailed scholarly work has ever been done. My conclusion here is that both films, by omitting almost entirely the history of the independence struggle in the period 1932 to 1942, fail to examine the growing alienation between the Congress Party and the Muslim leadership, which led to Partition and the creation of Pakistan becoming almost inevitable by the mid 1940s. In the case of *Sardar*, which is a film primarily concerned to show the period of the lead up to independence and partition, this omission is a significant historical absence, and, to echo Marcia Landy's terms, a conceptual limitation in the film.[368] Almost of equal importance in *Sardar* is the film's failure to examine the administrative errors that contributed to the enormous bloodshed at the time of Partition, in particular the decision to communalise the army and police, which one historian has claimed led subsequently to particular communities believing that it was imperative to shift across borders, actions taken out of fear of communal violence,

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[368] Landy, *Film, Politics, and Gramsci* 123.

without any protection being provided, decisions which led to communal violence rather than preventing it.[369]

With regard to the film *Raden Ajeng Kartini*, an important argument I put about this film is that the film emphasises the very ambiguous role played by the Dutch official in charge of education in the colony, Abendanon, and his wife, based in Batavia, who claimed to be Kartini's friends and supporters, but who, for reasons best known to themselves, were highly manipulative—and successful—in persuading Kartini not to take up the offer of studying in Holland. If Kartini had gone to Holland, she would not have married when she did and so would not have died in childbirth when she did. This fact is also emphasised by, and indeed explored over a number of chapters in, the biography of Kartini on which the film is based. But this is an aspect of Kartini's life that tends to be played down by Western, and particularly by Dutch, scholars working on Kartini, and so is an historical absence that is part of Western scholarship but not an historical absence in the work of Indonesians, whether biographer or filmmaker.

With regard to the Malaysian historical films, I have explored the absence in many of them of the Chinese dominated Communist Party of Malaya and particularly its opposition both to the Japanese occupation and to the return of the British colonisers in 1945. My detailed analysis of two recent historical films shows that this historical absence has been addressed in important films made in Malaysia by Malay directors since 2003.

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[369] Y. Krishan, *History* (The Journal of the Historical Association) 22-38.

Related to this issue of historical absences is the issue of invented traditions. This particularly becomes an issue in those films about which there is much less historical documentation. These are the films that deal with historical situations (or personages) that occur in periods much farther back in time. In this thesis the films affected by lack of much historical documentation are films discussed in Chapter 4, "Representation of Women in the Early Modern Southeast Asia." Here I argued that two of the Southeast Asian films discussed here are quite sophisticated in the way they model their narratives on older forms of narrative: the chronicle, and the legend or the folktale, rather than resorting to more conventional modern realistic narratives that are then set back into historical times. The third film, *Muen and Rid*, based on brief court records but set in a more recent era than the other films, is something of a combination of an earlier narrative form and a modern form. But in all cases it is not only traditions that are 're-invented', but, as particularly illustrated by *The Legend of Suriyothai*, it is history itself that is invented, for so little is really known about the time in which the film is set, and about Suriyothai herself. Moreover chronicles themselves are notorious for the way gaps in known history are filled in by the authors some hundreds of years after the events are claimed to have occurred. Nevertheless traditions, as well as history, are also invented or reinvented in some sense in these films, but in ways that are not entirely unfaithful to the history of traditions in these societies. For example, the film *Roro Mendut* makes Mendut's skills at dancing a major feature of her presence in the film, even more so than in the kethoprak play on which the film is based, for the camera frame can use both close ups and contextualising long shots. However, Mendut's performances of different

dances at the Mataram court, but particularly of the social dance, the *ronggeng* or *joget*, which she uses not so much as a social dance, but as a spectacle (until men in the court spontaneously join in and try to dance with her) are based on known traditions of social dancing, of very considerable cultural specificity, dating back to at least seven hundred years before the film is set.

Claire Holt, in her pioneering book *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change,* has demonstrated, through her analysis of figurative wall carvings at Borobodur Stupa, constructed in the eight century AD, in Central Java, the existence of dances—of the kind we can see performed by Mendut in the seventeenth century Mataram court featured in this film—as far back as the ninth century AD.[370] So in these films while there is no doubt there is some invention of traditions (for example of court protocols in the film *The Legend of Suriyothai*), as well as some invention of history and of historical detail, but there is also the re-invoking of actual traditions which have a long history, for they have long been valued and preserved in the society, even while undoubtedly subject to some degree of change. In the Thai film *Muen and Rid*, Buddhist traditions are emphasised, and here they are subject to modern modes of thought, particularly in the film's modern psychological exploration of the monk, Rid, and of his inability to reconcile his desire for Muen (with its combination of erotic attraction and respect, a meaningful experience for him) with his adherence to Buddhist precepts about the avoidance and overcoming of all desire whenever it is felt.

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[370] Holt, Claire, cited in David Hanan, "*Nji Ronggeng*: Another Paradigm for Erotic Spectacle in the Cinema", Virginia Matheson Hooker (ed.) *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia*, Oxford, Kuala Lumpur, 94.

In my study of both *Roro Mendut* and of *Muen and Rid* I have therefore emphasised strongly the erotic dimensions of the films, for inclusion of an erotic dimension in its social context is one way of filling in the gaps of a historical period which is only partly known, by using engagement with the sensual and the erotic as a means of doing so. But, as I argue in Chapter Four, the sense of the erotic found in both of these films, while differently presented, and different in the case of each film, does present the audience with a culturally specific sense of sensual and erotic experience, not uncommon in the touch cultures of Southeast Asia, which are substantially different from those kinds of predominantly visual eroticism discussed in Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema" article, where the woman, as least as she is presented in much of classical Hollywood cinema, it is argued, is not respected, but is the subject of a voyeuristic look expressing both fear and a need to investigate her.[371]

One theme that has not been explored in detail but is an issue that underpins all of these films is the question of historical agency and of agency in general. Gandhi was an historical figure who was an agent in history but also who had ideas about agency. He believed that historically one way of acting was by providing passive resistance, non-violent non-cooperation, to intractable historical situations. Sardar Patel was someone who followed Gandhi's ideas about agency, at least for a time, but appears not to have had original ideas about agency in the way that Gandhi did, and who in later years became a strong man who made pragmatic decisions, but apparently without losing Gandhi's respect. In the early Malaysian historical films, *Sarjan Hassan* and *Leftenan*

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[371] Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Macmillan, 1989.

Adnan, the contribution to history of each protagonist is to join a military organisation and act with skill and bravery in that context, so here the protagonist's agency depends on one fulfilling virtuously an institutionally determined role. In the film *Bukit Kepong*, this reaches a point where few of the characters are individualised, and most are simply seen as members of an institutional group, their agency consisting in fulfilling the roles and duties of members of such a group. A much more sophisticated view of agency and the limitations of human agency is found in the Malaysian film *Paloh*, where what is emphasised is the fact that many people find themselves required to live in difficult historical times where their actions become highly circumscribed and limited, if they are to survive, and where they may appear very unheroic, even to themselves, but where heroism may consist in small actions which alleviate or alter situations which are threatening to others. Here is a notion that history is being made in small ways all the time, and that history is not just made by prominent figures.

Of importance in this thesis is the question of women's agency as depicted in the seven films about women in some historical period, discussed in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis. Six out of the seven films discussed here, all of them, in fact, with the partial exception of *The Legend of Suriyothai*, are films about the struggles of women within highly patriarchal societies who attempt to become agents, that is, who attempt to find some means of acting independently of those who think they have the right to control them, even if initially their agency is simply in finding ways, however ingeniously, to defend themselves, as in the case of Roro Mendut. Even in *The Legend of Suriyothai*, where the central character is a member of a privileged elite, the film

focuses on her as an agent for good, even if for much of the time she is, like her husband, more a witness to history than a participant. Ultimately *The Legend of Suriyothai* may be an historical film that presents a portrait of the ideal Thai wife, even for the modern era, rather than a portrait of a hero in history, as argued by Amporn Jirattikorn.[372] But if this is the case, she is also an ideal wife who is expected to play some role in the public sphere, and not be confined simply to the domestic.

In the films about more modern periods, discussed in Chapter Five, Hirayama in *My Love is Burning* is a supporter of parliamentary democracy and of women's rights and women's education, and she leaves the home and operates within a public sphere. To some extent Hirayama finds institutions that will support her, for example a political party, and here the support that is provided to her by the Japanese liberals and their party is authorised by the aims and policies of the party, and not just based on the personal preferences of those who lead it. At least it appears that way for a time, until the men heading political parties or institutions prove to be unreliable. Even *Raden Ajeng Kartini*, though she does not recognise this soon enough, finds that institutional support promised to her (by the Abendanons) is not reliable. This possibility, of institutional support, is not available for the women in those films about women in the early modern era, who must rely entirely on their own skills or on reliable male partners. But in all of these films discussed in both chapters, the key issue is how a woman may come to have agency within her society, and particularly within the public sphere, rather than in a protected private sphere or in domestic servitude. Yukie in *No Regrets for Our Youth*

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[372] Amporn, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 303.

attempts to find some way of acting outside the protective environment of the middle class home both during the 1930s and during the period of the war in the Pacific and afterwards, even though this film, scripted and directed by men, does not seem to know what actions are available to her in the end, apart from dedicating herself, as a widow, to her late husband's parents. Halimah in *Pioneers of Freedom*, having brought the case of her oppression by her husband into the public sphere created by Islamic modernists in West Sumatra, and having won her case, is radicalised and becomes both an educator of women and an anti-colonial activist. In all these films the topic is how does a woman achieve agency in the public sphere, and by doing so, enter history, whether as a major player or a minor player.

On a number of occasions in this thesis I have suggested that the view of the woman as erotic spectacle and particularly the way the notion of eroticism is imagined as visual, voyeuristic, male centred and investigated, in Mulvey's Visual Pleasure' article is not adequate to a discussion of the sensual and the erotic in the Southeast Asian film. However another major argument in that article is to the effect that in the Hollywood films analysed by Mulvey, the woman rarely forwards the action, and is primarily the object, in many ways passively conceived, of the male look. In other words she does not have agency. The fact that this is a primary issue for world cinema is confirmed by the fact that – in these relatively exceptional Southeast Asian historical films – the primary issue for them is the possibilities of agency for women, particularly the roles women play, have played or can play, in history.

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