

Malay and Islam-Centric national narratives: modern art in Malaysia during the 1980s

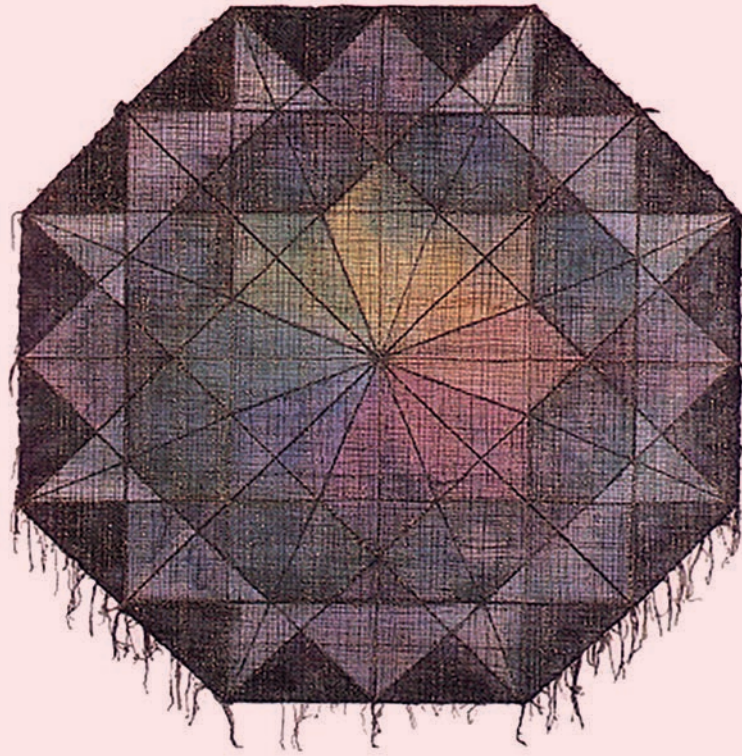
Sarena Abdullah

THE 1971 NATIONAL CULTURE CONGRESS could be seen as the first official attempt to shape arts and culture in Malaysia. Inspired by increasingly pro-Malay government policies, Malay intellectuals convened at the University of Malaya in August that year to formulate the country's policy on national culture. Three principles were established, namely, 'Malaysian National Culture must be based on the indigenous culture of the people from the region'; 'Elements from other cultures that are deemed proper and appropriate can be integrated as parts of the National Culture'; and 'Islam as an important element in forming the national culture'.

Perhaps more influential than the National Culture Congress in arts and culture was a rise in Islamic consciousness and policies from the mid-1970s onwards in Malaysia. This Islamic consciousness emerged from the *dakwah* movement that could be seen in parallel with the rise of ABIM (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) and the 1979 Iranian Revolution. It can be argued that Islamic consciousness had important implications on the art practices among Malay artists during the 1970s and 1980s.

In general, scholars note that Islamic considerations first emerged conspicuously in modern Malaysian art in the 1980s. It is during this time that more art exhibitions, seminars and scholarly writings began to engage with Islam, through discussions of Islamic art and culture. So much so that many Malay-Muslim artists sought to marry Islamic concepts, in whatever guise, with a modernist attitude in art.

Modernist artworks based on Islamic aesthetics include those of Sulaiman Esa, Zakaria Awang, Ahmad Khalid Yusof, and Ponirin Amin, among others. These artists can be argued to have positioned themselves in a larger context of Islamic *ummah* [society] by applying Islamic design conventions, such



as the Arabic Script or Jawi script, calligraphic motives and the Arabesque, the displays of verses from the Quran or the Hadith and epithets praising God's supremacy, to their art and even shunning the depiction of human and animal figures in their work.

As modern artists, they were not restricted to traditional media, but adopted Islamic aesthetics or philosophy in their art-making. Sulaiman Esa's *Nurani* series (Fig.1), for example, is a quest for Islamic aesthetics through artistic contemplation

Fig. 1 (Above): Sulaiman Esa, *Nurani* (1983); source: Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery (2002), Kuala Lumpur: NAG.

of traditional Islamic arabesque design. Through the arabesque, Islamic spiritualism in the work is closely wedded to the experience of harmony and archetypal reality through the reflection of the One (Allah the Almighty) and the concept of unity of *tawhid*.

For the most part, Islamic art in Malaysia thrived because the artists who shunned figurative art did not do so out of Islamic interdiction, but because they empathized with the abstraction of the avant-garde. Indeed according to art critic TK Sabapathy, "Art reflecting the global Islamic revivalism in the 1980s has either aligned itself with tendencies in Abstract Expressionism or found kinship with decorative art."

It is also important to note that the Islamisation of modern art in Malaysia was not down to solely the artist. Curatorial decisions played a key role too. The selection of artists and artworks for galleries and exhibitions often adhered to popular expectations of modern Islamic art. As a result such exhibitions and art were easily read as 'Islamic'. It must be noted that the proclamations of the New Economic Policy (NEP), culture policy, and the Islamisation policies were part of the country's nationalist phase, which inevitably reframed art with a nationalistic agenda. This collection of policies reinforced the state-endorsed national identity based on the hegemony of Malay culture despite the country's multiracial complexion.

To conclude, external social and economic factors also shaped Malaysian art during the late 1970s and 1980s. For example, the economic gain attained by the Malays through the NEP resulted in the emergence of a new Malay middleclass as well. According to Joel S. Kahn, the NEP and the emergence of the new Malay middleclass further bolstered the construction of Malaysian identity through the reiteration of Malay culture in particular. With the resurgence of Islam at that time, it was not surprising that some artists carried their interest in Islam into art to expound some form of national identity.

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An art historical parallax: the subject, spectacle, and myth of/in Juan Luna's *Parisian Life*

Pearlie Rose S. Baluyut

"[E]very age had its own gait, glance, and gesture."
Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*¹

Parisian Life (1892), by Filipino artist Juan Luna, features an interior scene in a café with a woman seated prominently on a banquette and three men at the far left corner. It fetched \$859,924 at Christie's auction in Hong Kong in 2002, an exorbitant sum paid by the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS), the pension fund institution of the Philippines.

The painting is a richly layered portrayal of contemporary social norms, gender politics and national allegory. Formal and social analyses reveal a woman, believed to be a prostitute, as the subject of the male gaze. Women in Paris were increasingly seen as a threat to the status quo. If they did not conform to the traditional role of a *femme honnête* (respectable woman), they were seen as the *courtisane*, or the prostitute. As a dangerous

These works were criticized by the Chinese Indonesian art critic, Oey Sian Yok, as "merely a competition to get attention from the authorities, not to mention that as a painting, the quality of the portrait is not that high". While Oey was referring to the work of Tjio Tek Djin, it was clear that she was pointing implicitly to YHAO's desire to seek Sukarno's patronage. Yet, YHAO's tribute to Sukarno was understandable in counterbalancing the endorsement from China. While demonstrating political attachment to both Indonesia and China might be considered opportunism by some, it was actually a means for the ethnic minority community to feel secure.

Nevertheless, when the New Order government took over in 1967 all Chinese-related cultural expressions, from family name to language, were banned. YHAO disappeared and many of the artists of Chinese descent in Indonesia went into exile as stateless individuals. YHAO's place in the history of Indonesian art was not examined until the *Reformasi* era.

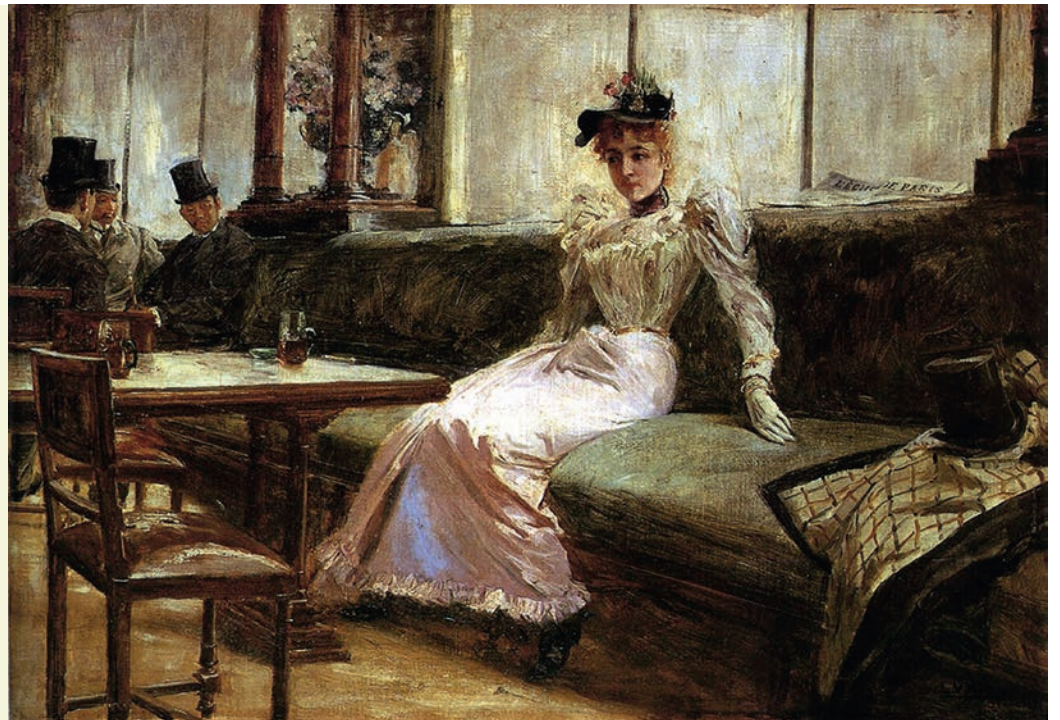
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woman, the prostitute bore the stigma of infecting men with venereal disease.

The unregistered prostitute, who constituted a growing labor force in Paris, was regarded as "the site of absolute degradation and dominance, the place where the body became at last an exchange value, a perfect and complete commodity".² In constant circulation like money, yet at times also clandestine, the prostitute could be considered as the spectacle in the flesh, which Manet's *Olympia* (1863) embodied. Indeed, she represented desire and death, a *femme fatale* who was both loved and loathed.

Parisian Life mirrors the constructions of masculinity and civility among the three men wearing European clothes, "part of a larger attempt at nationalist self-fashioning".³ Despite the civilized middle-class body, their brown faces disclose their racial identity. They are identified as the Filipino patriots Jose Rizal, Juan Luna (frontal pose), and Ariston Bautista (holding cane handle). They are fixed on the woman whose very appearance in a café is an erotic encounter itself. While Luna's self-portrait exhibits fatigue or even ennui, Bautista registers the curiosity and pleasure of a voyeur "in a fairly lascivious way" tilting his head toward the sexually objectified cocotte who furtively acknowledges his gaze.⁴ Far from heroic, Juan Luna brought to light the hypocrisy and duplicity of his milieu and the general anxiety against the prostitute. Despite of and whether the black umbrella functions as a barricade or signifies the phallus, the conventional prostitute of *Parisian Life* still approximates the familiar Old World – patriarchal – whose double standards Luna and the *ilustrados* enjoyed.

While Luna's body of work crystallized the artistic and economic negotiations he had to perform as a painter, his life and home became the model of the divided self and the imagined community. Contrary to nationalist historiography and its grand, developmental narrative, the growth of the new 'Filipino' consciousness was uneven, ambiguous, and problematic. Moreover, the yet-to-be-'Filipino' was already endangered. Although the prostitute personified the threat



Above: Juan Luna, *Parisian Life*, 1892, oil on canvas, 20.94 x 29.72 in. (53.2 x 75.5 cm.). National Museum of the Philippines, Manila

of sexual corruption, moral disintegration and physical death in *Parisian Life*, the latent fear of the *ilustrados* was caused, in general, by women and, figuratively, by France.

In sum, Juan Luna's *Parisian Life* is an Impressionist rendition of an interior of a café inhabited by a cocotte, a dandy, and three *ilustrados* in Haussmannized Paris. It can be read as an ideological unveiling not only of late 19th-century French modernity, but the "gait, glance, and gesture" of the other spectacle and myth that it mirrors: the problematic and complex formation of the nation-state and the scarcity and fetishism of the Filipino. Indeed, meaning, to echo Jacques Derrida, is always "deferred".

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