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Karya, A Film by Abror Rivai: Calmly Waiting for the Community

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Abstract

Karya (2017), a debut feature film from Abror Rivai, takes a highly personal approach in the telling of its story - a marked contrast to the usual, popular and prevalent genres. It is Abror's expression of his concerns for the future of Malay film storytelling and its filmmakers, who he sees as continuing the tradition of the village storytellers of ancient times. Abror also indulges in intertextuality by referencing many films wherein he sees narrative and stylistic similarities with his own approach. This paper explores some of Abror's concerns about Malay film storytelling as well as that of the state of the mainstream film industry which keeps churning out inane films which only appeal to a commercial, non-thinking audience. It is this that is preventing the rise of young, formally-trained filmmakers, who like himself, are eager to give voice to new, alternative and meaningful narratives. Abror has taken it upon his shoulders to initiate a long-awaited change in the state of affairs, come hell or high water, and to bring Malay cinema to be at par with world cinema.

Keywords Karya; Film; Storytelling; Narrative

Introduction

Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.

(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)



Figure 1 Abror Rivai Takes a Personal Journey in His Debut Film

The Irish poet and playwright, Oscar Wilde spoke of the painter with an appropriate insight: “The portrait of the sitter is, in reality, the portrait of the artist”. The master Italian film director, Federico Fellini echoes Wilde when he says: “All art is autobiographical”. And Akira Kurosawa, one of the masters of Japanese cinema, said similarly: “There is nothing that says more about its creator than the work itself”.

The Syrian poet, Adonis, spoke of the subjective state of the knower and objective state of the known world, that “to be aware, distance yourself from yourself”. Not many reach the level of reaching into the depths of one’s heart and mind to tell an objective story based on subjectivities. It is in such works that, in repeated viewings, will go on to reveal new insights and deeper layers of meaning (with some of it probably unintended by the filmmaker). Examples of such films across the board are *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa (Japan), *Pather Panchali* by Satyajit Ray (India), *Tokyo Story* by Yasujiro Ozu (Japan), *8 ½* by Federico Fellini (Italy), *Taste of Cherry* by Abbas Kiarostami (Iran) and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* by Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Turkey), to name a few.

Such deeply personal films will only appeal to a few, but for the auteur filmmaker, it is something that is highly satisfying. Such films will stand the test of time and go on to be studied and reflected upon long after the filmmakers (and their critics) have passed away. These films, aside from telling an entertaining story, also puts up a mirror to reflect, so to speak, the filmmakers’ society, community and nation, as well as the good (and bad) of their civilisation. Like the sages of old, such filmmakers are among the enlightened ones of a nation who are deeply perceptive. The irony is, their enlightenment arises from their disenchantment with the world. But it is this, precisely, that leads to the profound insights in their narratives.

Abror and *Karya*

Figure 2 The Face of the Protagonist in ‘*Karya*’, One That Reflects the Modern Character of the Malay Film Storyteller

Karya is Abror Rivai’s first feature-length film. Doubtless, he will go on to make many more, and it is only when we see his fourth or fifth film will we know whether he is an auteur with a unique voice and has something to say. Clearly, Abror’s maiden venture already indicates that he is a thinking filmmaker who is observant of the changes that have been going on around him, and he feels the need to articulate its ramifications. Aside from being a creative writer, Abror has made short films. He understands the conventions of cinema and its film dynamics in articulating his ideas. A cineaste, he is well versed with world cinema and has, it appears, been inspired by many of the films he has seen. These can be seen in various instances in *Karya*.

Abror is a film graduate from two institutions of higher learning. He is representative of some of the aspiring film graduates in the country who are still struggling to find their place in the industry. *Karya* is his debut feature after a number of excellent short films that include a very perceptive final-year project film where he takes a potshot at his own faculty, and the way film is being taught there. His lead star in *Karya*, Hasnul Rahmat, also made a film for his final-year project which, similarly, carried a veiled criticism of his film academy.

Through their short films, these two non-conformists have, independently and at different times, commented on the negative state of affairs in the industry that graduates of film are confronted with. With *Karya*, they collaborate to again speak of the obstacles and problems that have been plaguing the film industry but this time, it is as practitioners. They are also concerned with the future of other film graduates and newcomers who will be facing the same problems once they enter the industry. Among the problems is the resistance by producers to new and alternative narratives. Producers tend to go with tried and tested formulaic genres that have proven successful at the box office.

Clearly, Abror and Hasnul's attempts to bring different approaches goes against the grain of what has been entrenched in the mainstream film industry since the 1950s. Funders, film producers, television stations and audiences go with tried and tested formulas that ape (and sometimes are direct copies), of Hollywood productions. And so genres of comedy, romance, action and horror continue to rule. To make matters worse, a local film faculty dean has emphatically laid down the rules at his university: "Give the audience what it wants. Make genre films. Only then will our graduates have jobs." For him, arthouse films are *persona non grata* and must be avoided!

Malaysian Filmmakers Feeling Self-Reflexive

Aside from being personal, alternative films are, at times, also about the filmmakers themselves. With *Karya*, Abror questions his place in the scheme of things while reflecting upon his audience that are from his own community (read: same ethnicity). But he is not the only one. In Malaysia, self-reflexivity in films actually began with foreign-trained, theatre stalwart, (Datuk) Syed Alwi Syed Hassan with his *Tok Perak* (Tok Perak, the Medicine Seller, 1979). It was originally a stage play which was adapted into a five-episode television drama for Radio-Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). Because it was shot on 16mm film, Syed Alwi made a film version, his only one, from the material. Though not screened publicly, it is, in fact, Malaysia's first alternative film, one that depicts the annoyance of Syed Alwi at the students of today who are interested in the arts (specifically theatre), but who did not have the kind of passion and attitude that he had, and the required discipline for it. Mansor Puteh, also foreign-trained, followed with his one and only feature film, *Seman* (The Lost Hero, 1987). It spoke of the trials and tribulations of the protagonist trying to make it in a milieu that is hostile to (creative) people like him. At the end, the hero gives up his dreams, and goes on to a 'normal' career. Undoubtedly the film reflected Mansor's own disillusionment with the industry that has rejected the changes he was trying to bring to it.

A decade after *Seman*, the situation still had not changed for the better. Academic and filmmaker, Anuar Nor Arai went through the same experience with a film that is unfinished till this day. His *Johnny Bikin Filem* (Johnny Make a Movie, 1995), a film set within a 1950s gangster milieu in Singapore, speaks obliquely about the present state of the film industry in Kuala Lumpur. Various white screens appear in scenes of the film, sometimes with shadows of unknown people that denote the hidden hands at work in the industry that are preventing it from progressing. In the final scene of the film, Anuar points the finger at the powers-that-be as the real cause of the malaise that the industry is in.

In *Layar Lara* (Screen of Grief, 1998), a film about filmmaking, (Datuk Paduka) Shuhaimi Baba expresses her own frustrations as a filmmaker, and points her finger at the attitudes of industry personnel as well as (unfair) film censorship. Mamat Khalid's films are social-realist films, with almost all of them being parodies of the film, television and music industry. In *Man Laksa* (2006), he makes fun of the ludicrous state of affairs in the industry that also includes unenlightened television stations and an apathetic government bureaucracy. In scenes behind the stage where much action takes place, there is a white-painted board that is quite obvious, and at times, is framed with the main characters standing in front of it. This is the clue, like the white screens in *Johnny Bikin Filem*, that the subject is a reference to cinema. Another film, *Zombi Kampung Pisang* (Zombies of Banana Village, 2007), makes fun of the agency set up to look after the film industry. *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* (2008) questions why, after the ouster of the Chinese-dominated film industry, the locals were still unable to uplift the standards of Malay films to that of the Golden Age of the 50s and 60s. Mamat Khalid's tetralogy of the *Rock* films speaks of the fate of young, aspiring rock musicians at the hands of crooked promoters and indifferent politicians. Indirectly, Mamat also speaks of the bleak future facing aspiring actors and directors who have a passion for the industry.

In *Karaoke* (2009), Chris Chong, in his only feature film, uses satire to depict the same problems and issues facing the industry, as well as commenting on race relations. *Bunohan* (Return to Murder, Dain Said, 2011) is about the loss and demise of Malay culture and heritage in the face of capitalism. It also makes reference to the local film industry. The clues are in various scenes with white spaces behind the characters as well as in the extreme long shots of sky and barren sand on the beach which allude to the cinema screen. *Hanyut* (Adrift, 2015), is perhaps the most reflexive film of all after *Seman*. Directed by U-Wei HajiSaari, *Hanyut* is his suppressed frustration and grief as presented through his protagonist (a European), who, unused to the wiles and cunning of the locals, ultimately languishes in grief, despondency and loneliness. It is, in reality, about the brick wall that U-Wei himself has come up with against the locals in his twenty years of trying to make it in the industry with auteur films.

Haruan, the Snakehead (2015) by Razli Dalan and *Shadowplay* (2019) by Tony Pietra Arjuna are by far (literally), the darkest depictions of the sad state of Malaysian films and its filmmakers. In its subtext, *Haruan* warns of the (incestual) 'rape' of films brought about by the making of sub-standard films, while *Shadowplay* declares the agency that is supposed to help filmmakers as being less than human, echoing Anuar Nor Arai's conclusion in *Johnny Bikin Filem*. Like some of the afore-mentioned films, *Shadowplay*, too, makes use of white, screen-like spaces to indicate that the film is about filmmakers and filmmaking.

In the final scene of *Karya*, Abror, too, poses very obliquely, the (unanswered) questions by the industry, of how alternative filmmakers are continually at the mercy of producers and exhibitors who are more interested in making money with commercial cinema. But more than that, *Karya* is an exploration of his place in the scheme of things, raising questions about what his community and its civilisation has degenerated into. *Karya* is unassuming and unpretentious, while being deceptively simple in look. The latter element is a call to the discerning to look beyond the film to speculate on what it is really about. Through the film, Abror puts up a mirror to reflect himself (and his community), so as to ponder upon his involvement in the career that he has chosen to be involved with.

Over the years, a number of films, both local and international have been, in their subjects, themes and representations, about cinema and the filmmakers' reflections about the impersonal industry that they have dedicated their lives to. What is truly interesting about *Karya* for me is that it provokes the (thinking) audience to recollect similar films they have seen, where the subject of the film is the filmmaker himself, and that the dilemmas faced by *Karya*'s protagonist is basically the same. *Karya* has intertextual references, either consciously or subconsciously on the part of Abror, that point to films which are about the filmmakers and their art. *Karya*'s intentions also fit in snugly with what has been said by many writers and philosophers about art and its makers.



Figure 3 Films that are Self-Reflexive or with Subtle Comments on the State of the Film Industry and the Fate of a New Generation of Young Filmmakers.

***Karya* By Abror Rivai: As It Was Once Upon A Time and The Indexicality Of Landscapes**

To depict his own despondency and alienation, Abror Rivai has crafted a story about a filmmaker, *Karya*, who comes back to his village after a long absence. His future seems murky, and he appears to be going about aimlessly in his village. *Karya* (Hasnul Rahmat) is a young man who has chosen to be a filmmaker. For reasons of his own, his father (Pyanhabib Rahman) offers him no sympathy. *Karya* is

also distanced from his mother, *Kasih* (Nur Hanim Khairuddin), and sister, *Kenanga* (Zalikhha Izni). Only his girlfriend Suci (Faa Rashid), provides him any consolation. It is she who will go on to become family, providing him strength, and be his support to finally have him achieve his ambitions. Unlike the majority of filmmakers mentioned above, both foreign and local, Abror is clearly optimistic with his film's resolution, even though he does not provide a closure.

***Karya* and Family: Presence Through Absence**



Figure 4 The Mirror as a Signifier of the Subject of Cinema, and a Pointer to a Milieu That Entraps and Stultifies.

The first shot in *Karya* is of a mirror in the paternal house of *Karya*. In it, we see his mother, *Kasih*, being reflected. Then his sister, *Kenanga* comes in. Both of them are then reflected in the mirror. Reflections are artificial images. In the language of cinema, it can also mean that those who are reflected have psychological problems. In the context of *Karya*'s story, it also represents the cinema screen, and indicates that the film is about cinema. We see the two of them going about their daily chores of ironing clothes and folding or hanging them. They sit in proximity, talking. It is obvious that they have no problems between them. It is, in fact, a reference to and a comment on the inane scenes usually found in local television dramas.

In Akira Kurosawa's film, *Rashomon*, characters do not have names. They are identified only by the roles that they play. They are archetypes, characters with functions in a particular society, namely: the woodcutter, the priest, the samurai, the businessman, the wife, and the common man. It is as it was at the beginning of time when man first appeared on earth. What existed first were couples who then became families, and they soon became known by the manual work that they did. In *Karya*, the names of the characters – *Karya*, *Kenanga*, *Kasih* and *Suci* are non-Islamic names. These are very Malay names, names that existed for a long time before the coming of Islam. They are timeless and are connected with the natural order of things.

However, *Karya*'s family seems to have broken with tradition. Their behaviour and character do not reflect their cultural past. The post-colonial is in effect. They are happy to be identified with the

Malay vocation of being rice planters, just as the British colonialists had mapped out for their community. This is not *Karya's* milieu. To depict this, Abror does not show *Karya* even once in proximity with his mother and sister, and his father, only once in a flashback (who appears to have passed away at the current time of the story). His father, too, is never seen with his mother and sister. The absence speaks volumes about their relationship. Both his sister and mother speak about *Karya*, and know much about his life in the city but they do not appear to understand his aspirations. And when *Karya* suddenly pops up at his house in the village after many years, his sister's reaction is hardly one of joy with *Karya* not even being shown in the scene. His presence is notable for its absence on screen. As a contrast, *Karya* is seen more times with his girlfriend, and they are always seen always in proximity, a binary opposite of that with his family. She is, therefore, more family than his own family.

Karya's father is a failed writer who has given up on his dreams. And so he does not want *Karya* to follow in his footsteps. He rails at *Karya* for wanting to be a filmmaker instead of the profession of a doctor that he has envisioned for him. Seeing *Karya's* mounted poster of his school film project, he scolds him, angry that he put up a film poster instead of Qur'anic verses. He is of the old school, who thinks that art has no value, or perhaps he is disenchanted by the arts industry which probably has failed him.



Figure 5 *Karya's* Father, Feeling Lost, Misplaced and Adrift in Space and Time

Karya's father walks in the rice fields, contemplating it wordlessly. As a farmer, this is what he has done all his life, that which has given sustenance to him and his family. He needs *Karya* to continue that legacy. But he does not understand that times, ideals and values have changed. The world is not the same anymore. *Karya* is the young man of today (and like Abror), does not carry any baggage from the past. It is a brave new world, and it must be grasped with both hands. *Karya's* father goes to town, buys a magazine and sits uneasily at a bus station, reading it. People are waiting for buses to take them out of the town, perhaps to the city. But *Karya's* father is stuck in place and time. He languishes at a café, its walls plastered with pictures of old film stars, a pointer as to his unfulfilled ambitions. He sits, his mind full of unspoken thoughts. Later, we see him typing. In a voice over, he reads his story, mentioning things like struggle, community and nation. It is obvious that he has been left behind by the times and its issues.



Figure 6 Similarities and Difference Between *Karya* and His Father

Karya, too, walks down a path in the rice fields. But he is purposeful, dressed in black, in the garb of Malay warriors of old. In a voice over, he speaks of the similarities – and differences – between him and his father. Abror's *mise-en-scene* shows them in separate scenes walking in the rice fields. In long takes, both of them walk towards the camera and then stop to ponder the expanse of green all around them. But while *Karya* walks stridently along a sandy path, his father walks with difficulty on a bund, a connotation of the separate approaches to their lives and milieu. The many shots of the rice fields are contrasted with scenes of the father in the small town. He walks aimlessly, unrecognised by anyone, past faded shop walls. In another scene, their similarities are again seen. Shots from the back show *Karya* selecting songs on a juke box, while his father types out a story on an old typewriter. *Karya* represents the modern, his father, the past, of one who wallows in unrequited aspirations and forlorn memories.

***Karya* and Community: The Unseen and Uncaring**

Karya's family appears to be estranged from its community. Except for the boy who sends *Karya* on his motorcycle, there is no sign of any other people in the village. There is total absence, neither are there allusions to them. There is only the lone (Chinese) stall keeper in the restaurant who utters not a word in the film. In the telling of his story, Abror reflects upon his own community who, in their beginnings, tilled a bountiful land. Rice planting is something that the Malay community had been identified with from time immemorial. In Kuala Lumpur's first feature film, *Abu Nawas* (The Hero, Abu Nawas, Cyril Randall, 1954), produced by the Malayan Film Unit, the first shot is of a rice field with a school girl sitting near it, neatly identifying the community with its supposed vocation. Films such as *Abu Nawas* continue to perpetuate stereotypes and power relations in Malaya. The British identified the three main races of Malaysia by their economic functions. Malays were supposed to be good agriculturists, the Indians were rubber tappers or manual labourers, and the Chinese were businessmen. Such policies were meant 'to preserve the Malay way of life'.

The first scene of P. Ramlee's seminal film, *Semerah Padi* (The Village of Semerah Padi, 1956), has an extended scene of villagers working on rice fields that include the hero and heroine.

Semerah Padi was inspired by *Rashomon* which P. Ramlee had seen. It was P. Ramlee's exploration of Syariah laws versus a compassionate approach in dealing with human transgression. Though Malaysia gained its independence from the British imperialists in 1957, the identification of race by vocation continued to be depicted even as late as the 1960s. The award-winning docudrama by Filem Negara Malaysia, *Mandi Safar* (Mohd. Zain Hussain, 1962), has in its opening and closing, of scenes of rice fields from whence the lead characters in the film come from and go back to. The post-colonial mentality continues to be in force.



Figure 7 *Karya* Takes in the 'Claustrophobia' of Wide-Open Spaces

By using verdant rice fields as landscapes that recur throughout the film, Abror gives his own viewpoint of being a filmmaker with a cultural history, but it is obviously one that is not making him move forward. He sees himself as part of a long line of *penglipur lara* (traditional village storytellers), from ancient times for whom nature was the inspiration for poems and stories. Abror has resolved to continue that tradition but he will do it in his own way. In another sense, community here also alludes to the kind of audience that he and other filmmakers are constantly looking for. Abror poses the question, that if in light of an apathetic family and village community, would there be an audience for his works when their lifelong quest is only for food, shelter and security. The history of the reception of alternative films is woeful and is best exemplified by the quote from Beckett at the beginning of this paper, i.e., of an audience that is lacking. Beckett's character is confined to a room while *Karya* is in a wide, open space. But for him, that space is as claustrophobic as that of the characters in *Waiting for Godot!*

***Karya* and Milieu: To Be or Not To Be**



Figure 8 Landscape in Film. From Left: Xie Fei's 'A Mongolian Tale'; Zhang Yimou's 'The Road Home'; Steven Spielberg's 'War Horse' and Yasmin Ahmad's 'Mukhsin'

In Abror's landscapes of rice fields, it is as if time has stood still. Nothing has changed for centuries, either in pre-colonial, colonial or post-colonial times. On the other hand, it also represents the unsullied primordial. Wide open and verdant landscapes have been the choice of many filmmakers to show how nature plays an important role in the lives of their film characters. Among them are Xie Fei, one of the masters of Chinese cinema, with *A Mongolian Tale* (1995); Zhang Yimou with *The Road Home* (1999), with scenes inspired by Xie Fei's film with its wide shots of the verdant countryside and forests, and Steven Spielberg with *War Horse* (2012), where a horse gives birth to a foal in the open amidst green, rolling meadows (and not in a stable).

In *Karya*, Abror has numerous vistas of rice fields, as Yasmin Ahmad similarly showed in her film, *Mukhsin* (2007). The signification brought about by both Abror and Yasmin is that the land their community lives on provides them sustenance, and that they will never go hungry. It is a fertile land where one does not really have to work hard. Plant a stick in the earth and it will blossom into a tree, so the Malay saying goes. But is that what life is all about? While Yasmin used it to show the lack of progress of a segment of her community, Abror uses his family and the milieu of his village as devices to invite us to look at a larger picture.



Figure 9 *Karya* and His Girl, Standing Above the Masses, the Nouveau Young.

For the hero, *Karya*, there needs be a different milieu. He sits with his girlfriend on the space of a rooftop in the town. They have a different view (literally), of their future together, and it is a marked contrast to the rice fields. Towards the end of the film, we see them in front of colourful graffiti splattered on a wall in the background. For them, the writing on the wall is clear. They have to leave the current Malay milieu of the village, and strike out on their own in the city.

Moving from village to city for progress has also been articulated by Satyajit Ray in his *Pather Panchali* (1955). Born a Brahmin, a priest (Kanu Bannerjee), earns a meagre living in a poverty-stricken village but dreams of being a poet and playwright. His wife (Indir Thakrun), urges him to move the family to the city where their lives could improve through his position as a priest. He does not listen to

her but is forced to do so only after his daughter (Uma Das Gupta), dies while he was away. George Lucas, too, articulated it in *American Graffiti* (1973). Lucas has his main character, Curt Henderson (Richard Dreyfuss), going around his small town on the night of his graduation. He has all manner of encounters (likening it to experiencing 'graffiti'). The next morning, he decides to leave the town. It is the only way he can make it in the world. Needless to say, *American Graffiti* was also self-reflexive. Lucas became the alternative filmmaker who thumbed his nose at Hollywood and became one of its biggest producers.

Malay Cinema: Hanging Heavily on the Mind

Abror takes a benign and optimistic view of his (future) life as a filmmaker as compared to some of those mentioned above. Mansor Puteh's hero in *Seman* gives up at the end, with Anuar Nor Arai's hero in *Johnny Bikin Hero* dying of a gunshot wound while on a film set. In *Shadowplay*, Tony Pietra Arjuna's hero is killed while on an assignment. However, on an optimistic note, his search for a girl, signifying those who will continue the struggle, pays off. It is the young who will continue the struggle – an element that has been a constant, recurring refrain in the films of some local filmmakers such as Dain Said, Al Jafree Md Yusop, Chiu Keng Guan, Vimala Perumal, Jess Teong and Mamat Khalid.

In the acknowledgements at the end of the film, Abror thanks his loving family for always understanding and supporting his struggle and his journey in the arts, more so in the rejuvenation of a jaded Malay cinema. His hope is for Malay films 'to continue to be alive and to be resurgent with a new spirit and strength that will never waver'. It is almost like a manifesto, something that he is dedicating his life to. It is in line with what Andrey Tarkovsky has said about film being "almost religious because it is inspired by a commitment to a higher goal". Abror is sure of his objective but his problem will be with the audience of today, as 'irreligious' as they may be. A major paradigm shift is called for to set the situation right. There is also Abror's responsibility to his public as a filmmaker who is an observer of his community's social and historical direction, what Tarkovsky has noted about the filmmaker's role, that it is "(B)ecause of his special awareness of his time and of the world in which he lives..."

Taking the words of Leonardo da Vinci, that "A painter should begin every canvas with a wash of black, because all things in nature are dark except where exposed by the light", Abror begins by showing the black ('the darkness' in his life with family and milieu), and then slowly reveals the light (his ever-supportive girlfriend, his realisation and his own determination).



Figure 10 He Who Controls the What and When

To live up to his ‘manifesto’ is going to be a daunting task, and Abror shows subtly some of the other challenges that await. Quite early in the film, there is a scene of a Chinese shopkeeper who sets up for business. He unlocks a padlock and removes the chain round a wooden box. He pushes it away to reveal an old jukebox of Malay songs, which *Karya* will later utilise. At the end of the film, the shopkeeper repeats the process, but this time, it is in reverse. He drags back the box in front of the jukebox, and then padlocks it with the chain.

The shopkeeper represents the producer/exhibitor/funder. The façade of the jukebox functions like a cinema screen. The chain is a metaphor for the all manner of restrictions that filmmakers face in Malaysia: from their faculty days when they are told what kind of films to make, up to the funding body that determines what genre would be suitable in order for the film to sell, to the Censorship Board with its quirky rules and regulations, and finally to the exhibitors who also determine when and how the films may be screened and for how long. And in the scene of his sister, *Kenanga*, running into a male friend in the park, we see an example of the simplistic treatment and inane dialogue prevalent in popular cinema or in television dramas. This is what *Karya* wants desperately to change.



Figure 11 Looking in the Same Direction as a Signifier of a Common Objective. Far Right: A Scene from the Climax of ‘The Graduate’.

There are many scenes of *Karya* and his girlfriend talking, sitting next to each other and facing the camera. It is similar to the final scene in *The Graduate* (Mike Nicholls, 1967), where the hero has literally snatched away his girlfriend at the altar as she was going to be married to someone else. They both sit silently facing the camera in the back seat of a moving bus, heading to they know not where. The girl has a slight smile on her face. Once or twice, she looks at the hero, then at the camera. This

seems to be a happy ending but it is also one of trepidation for them. The unspoken question is: can they make it together and go on to live happily ever after? And whatever it is, like *Karya* and his girl, they have escaped from a stifling milieu.

In Closing

At the end of the film, *Karya*'s girlfriend has made up her mind. She will go to the city with him, leaving everything behind. Unlike the characters in *Waiting for Godot* who wait and wait in an empty room, both *Karya* and *Suci* make the decision to leave and stride forward. In a long take, the camera walks with them. It begins to drizzle. In Malay belief, it is a *rahmat* (grace from God), signifying future success. Once or twice, each of them looks at the other. Nothing is spoken but the intentions are clear. They will make it, come hell or high water. In a final moment, the lens defocuses on them, denoting the obstacles ahead. Here, *Karya*'s voice over takes the words of Karl Marx: that similarly, *Karya*'s life is like a play that ends in a tragedy. The last shot is of rice fields but there's a pall cast over them. Credits roll, superimposed on it. Both the defocus and this dark scene are negative indexes, a portent of the difficult times ahead, something that *Karya* is *redha* (acceptance) about.

Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, among other things, deals with the meaninglessness of life on earth and the futility of human existence. But in spite of that, it is also about friendship, of hope amidst despair, and the wonder that amidst all this, human existence prevails. It points to the story of civilisation and its beginnings. That no matter how desperate the circumstances, be it with nature or man, the struggle must continue. And like the planting of a fruit tree, it will all be for the future. The next generation of filmmakers will build on the struggles and successes of their past, and go on to tell their own individual stories. One thing is clear - and they are *redha*; they have accepted it. They will wait for a Godot who, in all probability, may never appear. Such is, and will be, the lot of the *penglipur lara*, and it will be for all time.

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