

## Communicating with Social Imaginary: Cultural Identities, Popular TV Fiction, and Audience Responses

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### Abstract

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, popular TV fiction in Malaysia has been thriving, popular, and critically-acclaimed due to their extensive local, national reach. Drawing more than one million viewers including staggering online reruns, this sheer popularity of some popular TV fiction has led to the questioning of issues that viewers can relate to. In this paper, we contextualize popular TV fiction within a space of cultural identities, focusing on audience-response analysis. Specifically, we argue that these popular TV fiction permit audience to communicate with images of social imaginary as seen in *Julia*, *Adam & Hawa*, and *On Dhia*, articulating issues related to controversies and taboo such as alcoholism and cohabitation. Through diverse audience voices captured from interviews and personal narratives, we will show how their reactions reveal the intricacies of dealing with Malay subjectivities. By telling their stories, we also show how these audience responses may reflect cracks and fractures, between what is supposed to be shown and the reality in which these expectations are translated in popular TV fiction.

*Keywords:* Malayness; cultural identities; audience responses; popular culture; literature

### Introduction

This paper argues that as viewers engage with the narratives exchanges of *Julia*, *On Dhia*, and *Adam & Hawa*, the television fiction (TV fiction, hereafter) studied invariably signals recurring issues of alcoholism and cohabitation that are recognizably present in their verbal and written responses. From watching, reflecting, resisting, and analyzing issues in TV fiction, these issues of taboo and controversies are visible, describing the complexities behind Malay cultural identities. To explore further, social imaginary theory is employed as a lens through which audience voices show the extent to which *Julia*, *On Dhia*, and *Adam & Hawa* provide spaces for presenting another angle of Malayness that investigates social and cultural inquiries. However, a word of caution is in order; although we do not in any way assert other issues such as patriarchy, bullying, spirit possession and exorcism, hypocrisy, corruption, domestic violence, infidelity, dishonesty, directness, vulgarity, filial piety, mercifulness, and Islamic resurgence are not important, the emerging research culled from audience responses seem to suggest the dominance of issues concerning alcoholism and cohabitation. In addition, although some of these issues are two best controversial and at worst insidious cases (read: alcoholism and cohabitation), they have motivated us to identify, scrutinize, and press these inquiries further. With theory of social imaginary, what do these issues transgressing *adat*-Islamic values signify? Audience of *Julia*, *On Dhia*, and *Adam & Hawa* offer an insight on this question.