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**Media Portrayals of People with Disabilities: An Analysis of Malaysia's Television Series, "Kerana Cintaku Saerah" (Because of My Love, Saerah)**

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**ABSTRACT**

The media has a powerful ability to influence and shape society's perceptions towards people with disabilities. The portrayal of individuals with disabilities within the media can often have an enormous impact on the way that are perceived by viewers. In Malaysia, people with disabilities are frequently viewed as pitiful, thus medias are more likely to use the element of sympathy in order to garner support from its targeted audience. The focus of this article is on the portrayal of people with disabilities in a popular television series in Malaysia, Kerana Cintaku Saerah (Because of My Love, Saerah) through the analysis of; self-acceptance by the characters with disabilities, family and society's acceptance, and disability stereotypes in the Malay society. The findings revealed the ideation of how people with disabilities are treated, as well as exhibits disability stereotypes that exist in the Malay society.

*Keywords:* Media portrayal, people with disabilities, prejudice, stereotype

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**INTRODUCTION**

A The portrayal of people with disabilities in the media started as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the first fifty second film, The Fake Beggar made it to the silver screen industry. The film, which

was produced in 1898 by Thomas Edison depicted a man who pretended to be visually impaired in order to collect money and was eventually chased off by police (Ivory, 1997). After the first instalment of a disability in this movie a trend was established and numerous other movies started to use disabilities as a means to heighten the effect of slapstick comedies, as well as melodramas (Safran, 1998). This led to the development of various themes that were derived over the years through the portrayal of individuals with disabilities within films. In 1904, themes such as, "humor,

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evil, helplessness, confinement, heroism, and dehumanization” were introduced in movies. In 1912, a movie introduced the theme of “curability” through the usage of medicine. In 1929, movies included themes such as “fear and horror” while in 1930s, movies had themes of “possession and madness”. In 1950s, the theme “civilian superstar” was introduced which emphasized on self-determination and social support, and finally, the themes on “facing obstacles and living independently” among people with disabilities were featured in movies in the 1960s (Safran, 1998).

Similar to language, the ideas, concept, and stories found in literature, television and movies have a substantial impact on public perception towards people with disabilities. Visual media has a particularly strong influence on our attitudes towards other people. Blue et al. (2010), reported that a film can be used as an effective pedagogical methodology to provide an entertaining and meaningful way to change attitudes about disabilities. This also means that, while unrealistic portrayals of people with disabilities in the media can create false impressions and expectations, positive and realistic views of what it is like to have a disability would also be able to increase society’s understanding of disabilities and reduce stereotypes and prejudice.

In 1997, Hodges-Aeberhard and Raskin conducted a research regarding employment barriers faced by people with disabilities in Malaysia. They found that society’s noble intentions and genuine concerns to protect people with disabili-

ties from harm, injury or embarrassment have formed and reinforced the belief that people with disabilities are unable to work independently. Following that, many other studies were conducted to evaluate the perception of Malaysians attitudes towards disabilities. A research by Khatijah (2002) revealed that generous people in Malaysia have long viewed people with disabilities as a group of people in need of monetary assistance. Thus, the facilities and assistance for people with disabilities are mostly provided and funded through donations made by the public.

The societal perspective towards people with disabilities as revealed by the researchers above are shown in Malaysian film and television movies. A Malay movie by the legendary Tan Sri P.Ramlee in 1962, *Ibu Mertuaku* (My Mother-in Law) for instance, portrayed a visually challenged man who faced adversity in living independently. More than 40 years later, the ideation and perspectives of disabilities in local scenes do not seem to change much. In 2008, a film called *Pensil* directed by M. Subash Abdullah, portrayed the theme self-determination and described the hardship in survival by characters who have disabilities.

As media portrayals are known to bring a huge impact on society’s attitude towards disabilities, it is beneficial to highlight the stereotypes depicted by popular media such as the local television series. This paper analysed *Kerana Cintaku Saerah* (Because of My Love, Saerah), a twelve episodes Malay television series,

directed by Shahrulzad Mohameddin in 2007. It portrays prejudice, stereotypes and the perspective of a Malaysian society towards people with disabilities. The series were reported by TV3- one of the TV channels in Malaysia to have a high viewer rating due to its emotionally inspiring scenes which are aesthetically significant and critically important for Malaysians.

The first part of this paper will review the storyline of this television series, while the second part discussed the findings from the analysis. The analysis of the story is divided into three parts; portrayals of self-acceptance, portrayals of family and social acceptance, and portrayals of stereotypes.

## OBJECTIVES

From the ecological perspective which was introduced by Ernst Haeckel in 1868, it has been found that organisms are interdependent with their environment. Therefore, the stereotypes and prejudices should be reviewed from the perspectives of both self and the environment. This paper intended to analyse the following aspects that are found in the television series, *Kerana Cintaku Saerah*.

- (1) Aspect of self-acceptance by characters with disabilities,
- (2) aspect of family and society's acceptance towards characters with disabilities, and
- (3) other aspect of stereotypes of disabilities.

## THE STORYLINE

*Kerana Cintaku Saerah* (Because of My Love, Saerah) **is a story** about a diligent young man who has mental disability named *Jibek* who lives with his foster mother, *Mak Hawa* and Mak Hawa's daughter, Saerah. *Jibek* fell in love with Saerah since they were young. Due to poverty, Mak Hawa borrowed some money from a rich widow named *Cik Ros*. For ages, Mak Hawa faced difficulties to settle the debt due to the high interest rates. *Jibek* tried his best to bail Mak Hawa out by doing various jobs to earn some money, while Saerah insisted on going to Kuala Lumpur to find a job. She was influenced by Yati, *Cik Ros*'s eldest daughter, who then introduced her to Murtaza, who was a background actor in the story. Saerah's love at first sight for Murtaza has led her to commit premarital sex (which is a highly unacceptable behavior in the Malaysian society), and eventually became pregnant. To avoid shame, Saerah was forced by Mak Hawa to marry *Jibek* when Mustaza irresponsibly fled the village and disappeared. Saerah reluctantly accepted *Jibek* as her husband and made up her mind to follow Yati to Kuala Lumpur after giving birth to her daughter, Suraya. She then met an old rich man, Dato' Z who sincerely wanted to marry her. *Jibek* became heartbroken, and the moment he felt he was at his wits' end, met a new friend, Nomi, a girl who was also intellectually challenged. He looked after Saerah's daughter, Suraya and took good care of Mak Hawa who became paralyzed due to stroke. 12 years later, Saerah went back to her village and saw her ailing mother on her death bed who

passed soon after her arrival. This movie ended with Jibek sitting in a hut near the paddy field and Saerah asking Jibek for his forgiveness. In the end, Jibek chose Nomi to be his wife instead of Saerah.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

According to Dodia (2012), some films are based on real phenomenon, while others are based on the script writer's idea. A film can be analysed from different perspectives and angles. According to Dodia (2012), there are four major areas which need to be analysed in making a film analysis which are, (1) the effectiveness of the dialogues and storyline, (2) cinematography, (3) performance of actors, and (4) film editing.

Based on the guidelines by Dodia (2012), for data collection, each episode must be viewed three times by the researchers. The data is collected based on the following categories which contain elements of self-acceptance, family and society's acceptance, and other disability stereotypes. Attention should also be given to every single dialogue and plotline, as well as to actors' acting. Other than that, the researchers are required to analyse the sceneries, set, and costumes used in the film. The final step is to conduct discussions among researchers in order to achieve standard interpretations.

## **FINDINGS**

According to the research conducted by Norazit (2010), within the context of

Malaysia, among the themes used by the media to describe people with disabilities as exceptional being pitiful, surrounded by the idea of blame and advocacy. *Kerana Cintaku Saerah* generally carries one vital message that portrays people with disabilities as those who have the need to love and to be loved. This television series have successfully presented many stereotypes, myths and false beliefs uphold by the Malay society towards people with disabilities. Certain stereotypes were highlighted in this movie while other false beliefs were disputed.

The findings of this research are presented in three different sections namely the portrayals of self-acceptance, the portrayals of family and society acceptance, and the portrayals of other disability stereotypes.

### **Portrayals of Self-Acceptance**

Self-acceptance is one of the crucial elements in determining self-esteem and self-advocacy among people with disabilities. Carl Rogers, the prominent psychologist and the founder of Person Centered Therapy (1953) believes via self-acceptance, the negative attitudes against self will decrease, while positive attitudes towards self will increase, and acceptance by others will relatively increase. Thus, illustrating positive self-acceptance in media such as in movies or dramas may help to influence people with disabilities to develop good self-views.

In this movie, negative self-acceptance is portrayed more than the positive self-acceptance by the three characters with disabilities. The portrayals can be summed up as below:

| Characters | Self-Acceptance Potrayals   |
|------------|---|
| Jibek      | a) Did not perceive his disability as a barrier for him to work and live independently.<br>b) Perceived his limitation as a cause of other's inconvenience. |
| Nomi       | a) Felt inferior<br>b) Perceived herself as an unattractive woman   |
| Mak Hawa   | a) Felt helpless<br>b) Perceived herself as a burden to others  |

Overall, even though the series were able to show that the characters were putting in the effort to survive and accepted their disabilities, this movie represented the struggles experienced by the characters with disabilities to maintain self-acceptance while striving to conform to the society. Jibek, for example, introjected the belief of himself as "not clever" and went along with the perceptions made by other people of him. At the same time, he also struggled to maintain his dignity by objecting the idea of others who perceived him as mentally unsound.

The portrayal of self-acceptance by Nomi, another character with disabilities

was portrayed as a character who possess positive self-perception yet perceived herself as unattractive especially when competing with another female character, in order to win Jibek's heart. This idea tallies with the findings of a study conducted by Klerk and Ampousah (2003) with 40 women with disabilities, whereby it shows that the participants compared themselves with others even after claiming the acceptance of their disabilities. This resulted in negative influences on their public self as well as their experience as the total self.

A few other stereotypical themes related to self-acceptance were also identified in this television series. In general, the flow of the story portrayed the themes such as self-dislike and self-helplessness. These themes were very obvious in the scenes that show the way the characters encountered difficulties in life such as poverty, debts, and negative treatment by others. Elements of sadness and despair were used to describe the characters when they encountered obstacles. For example, there was a scene with a quadriplegic character named Mak Hawa, expressing her sense of helplessness to Jibek by saying in Malay, "*Mak Hawa banyak menyusahkan Jibek*" which can be translated to, "I have been a burden to you, Jibek".

Other than that, the theme of advocacy is also embedded in portraying self-acceptance. After struggling to overcome life difficulties, the subsequent scenes usually show how the characters develop the courage to move on. This can be seen in the story where Jibek promised to take

care of Suraya after Eira left for Kuala Lumpur.

**Portrayals of Family and Social Acceptance**

The society’s negative attitudes towards people with disabilities are formed by the prejudice and false beliefs that they uphold. Throughout history, the lives of people with disabilities have always been surrounded by injustice. There are a number of scenes in this story which show the perceptions and reactions of society towards people with mental disabilities. The portrayals can be summed up as below:

| <b>Characters</b>                     | <b>Portrayalf of Family and Social Acceptance</b>                          |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Mak Hawa and Suraya                   | a) Accepting Jibek unconditionally<br>b) Showing trust                     |
| Villagers                             | a) Treating Jibek nicely<br>b) Insulting                                   |
| Saerah, Yati, Jenal, Mustaza, Cik Ros | a) Insulting, discriminating, making fun of Jibek<br>b) Negative prejudice |

This movie presents a variation of portrayals of family and society towards people with disabilities. The portrayals, be it a positive or negative acceptance, indirectly describe some themes in the stereotypes the society have towards people with disabilities.

The positive acceptance by the family members, which appear as showing trust and unconditional acceptance of the characters with disabilities, may also show the typical negative stereotypes. One of the stereotypical themes that can be observed in this movie is heroism which can be the character’s own worst and only enemy. This can be seen in the scene where Jibek questioned his ability to improve his own reading skills and his daughter, Suraya responded positively by saying, “*Siapa kata ayah tak pandai? Cuma kena usaha je...*” (Who was it that said you are not clever? You just need to work harder).

Another well-known myth about people with disabilities portrayed in this movie is the notion that they are sexually abnormal. The preoccupation with sexual impotency looms large in many of the films dealing with disabilities (Barnes, 1992). Homer’s ‘Odyssey’ written at least 500 years BC, portrayed people with disabilities as incapable of sexual activity. Battye (1996) as cited in Barnes (1992) referred this stereotype as “the Chatterley Syndrome” which derived from D.H. Lawrence’s novel ‘Lady Chatterley’s Lover’ a story about a couple’s relationship where Lady Chatterley perceived her husband as sexually inactive.

*Kerana Cintaku Saerah* illustrates the misconception on sexual anomalies among people with disabilities in some of its scenes. In one of the scenes, Jibek asked Mak Hawa the meaning of adultery when he heard about what had happen to Saerah. Mak Hawa’s slow re-

response and facial expressions when answering Jibek's question implied that Jibek was unable to understand the meaning of sexual relationship. Another scene that showed this myth was when Saerah responded to Jibek's question on the topic of sexual relationship by saying, "*Jibek takkan faham...*" (Jibek, you will never understand...).

Another theme that is described in this show in portraying people with disabilities is humor. Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, people with disabilities were intensely stigmatized and were called names. Historically, people with disabilities were called by numerous derogatory terms such as 'cripple', 'invalid', 'retarded', 'victim', 'unfortunate', 'crazy' and 'tragic'. The habit of calling names to someone with disabilities has become a common phenomenon in the society. In this story, instead of being called his original name, Najib, the disable character was called or known as Jibek.

The stereotypical theme of people with disabilities as innocent is also illustrated in this story. This can be seen in some scenes which showed Jibek's responds to the treatment of others. For instance, there was a scene where Jibek was sharing his worries and frustration with his goat, and expected his goat to respond by creating his own version of the goat's dialogue. The scene somehow illustrated Jibek as someone who appeared to be innocent and had low intellectual ability. Another scene which displayed this stereotype was in the scene where Jibek tried protecting Saerah from Jenal by punching Jenal's in the stomach and on the face. In respond to this, Mak Hawa

apologised to Cik Ros and said to her in Malay, "*Faham-faham je la...akal dia pun bukannya panjang sangat...*" which can be translated as, "Please understand, his mental ability is a bit low). This scene portrayed Jibek as a person who was not able to think carefully of his actions due to his disability. The display of this misconception in the media can create false understanding in the society towards people with mental disability.

### **Portrayals of Other Disability Stereotypes**

Generally, we can see the typical stereotypes of people with disabilities presented in this movie. People with disabilities are often characterized as having low economic status, unemployed or less likely to be white collar workers. This movie illustrated this stereotype characters. In the story, Jibek was described as a man who came from a poor family and earned money from doing odd jobs in the village. Besides the stereotypes that have been discussed above, we can also see how this movie disputed the myth that viewed a person with mental disability as a person dependant of others. This story was able to dispute this myth by showing that the characters were able to live independently, and were able to get a job to earn a living like any other person.

Not only this movie displayed the idea of people with mental disability as able to live independently, it also gives the idea that they have the capabilities to build a family. The myth was disputed in this movie and was exhibited by Jibek who

successfully raised Suraya and took good care of Mak Hawa.

Nevertheless, some misconceptions among people with disability were clearly displayed in this story. For instance, there was a scene in this story where Jibek who was illiterate counted the money wrongly “*Lima ringgit sepuluh sen...lima ringgit dua sepuluh sen..*”(Five ringgit and ten cents...five ringgit and two ten cents...) instead of ‘*lima ringgit dua puluh sen*’ (five ringgit and twenty cents). Jibek’s low intellectual capability in this scene was exaggerated as according to National Centre on Workforce and Disability (NCWD), people with mental retardation can read, write and count, as well as possessed the same capabilities and skills like others.

Finally, in the final part of this story was a scene where Jibek was seen holding Nomi’s hands to inform his decision to marry Nomi instead of Saerah. This scene displayed a subtle stereotype where a person with disabilities was only suitable to marry among those with disabilities.

## CONCLUSION

This film has displayed the myths and stereotypes among people with disabilities which existed in the Malay society. It portrayed the perceptions on disabilities from the perspectives of person with disabilities and people around him. The false perceptions towards people with mental disability were also clearly displayed in this story. Some showed their sympathy, while others relate mental disability with insanity. This movie also

disputed certain myths about people with disabilities which have long existed within the society. For instance, people with mental disability are able to work if they are given the opportunities and are not dependant of others. This was illustrated in the story through the villagers who offered various jobs to Jibek to help him earn a living. Lastly, the story also depicted characters with disability as innocent in order to generate sympathy from the audience.

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