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TEACHING CULTURAL IDENTITY VIA FASHION KEBAYA AS EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK IN MALAY CINEMA (1950–2000)

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Abstract:

The kebaya, a traditional Malay garment, transcends fashion by encapsulating ethnic identity, social conduct, and evolving notions of femininity. This paper examines the portrayal of the kebaya in classic Malay cinema from 1950–2000 and recontextualises it as an educational tool for teaching cultural identity, history, and social behaviour. Using a qualitative object oriented methodology, films such as *Hang Tuah* (1956), *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), and *Masam Masam Manis* (1965) were analysed for costume design, symbolism, and narrative function. The findings underscore three principal pedagogical themes: modesty and ethics, socioeconomic class, and femininity shaped by modernisation. These themes illustrate how the kebaya functioned as a cultural emblem representing morality, social stratification, and shifting gender dynamics in postcolonial Malaysia. The study highlights the kebaya as an effective instrument for object based learning, critical analysis, and interdisciplinary instruction across fashion studies, cultural studies, and media education. Despite challenges related to archival accessibility and cultural sensitivity, there are promising opportunities for enhanced teaching through digital archives, cross cultural comparisons, and innovative curriculum development. Overall, the study strengthens cultural pedagogy by framing the kebaya as both a historical garment and an educational lens that bridges tradition, modernity, and learning.

Keywords:

Kebaya, Pedagogy, Malay Films, Cultural Identity, Fashion Education, Social Behaviour, Tradition And Modernity

Introduction

Traditional garments play a significant role in shaping cultural memory, national identity, and societal values. In Malaysia, the kebaya is widely recognised as a symbol of femininity, elegance, and cultural heritage (Rahman, 2021; Aziz, 2020). Although often celebrated as timeless attire, its meaning extends beyond aesthetics to encompass notions of modesty, social status, and modernisation. Malay cinema, particularly during its golden era from the 1950s to the 1970s, provides a rich visual archive of the kebaya, frequently featured on iconic actresses such as Saloma and Sarimah. These cinematic portrayals situate the kebaya within narratives of tradition, ethics, and modernity, positioning film as a powerful medium for reflecting and negotiating cultural identity (Lee, 2020; Lim, 2019).

Despite the kebaya's cultural and cinematic significance, academic attention has tended to focus more heavily on the baju kurung, leaving the kebaya comparatively underexplored, especially in relation to education. While recent scholarship highlights the kebaya as a cultural artefact and emblem of femininity (Rahman, 2021; Aziz, 2020), limited research has examined its potential as a pedagogical resource. As cultural pedagogy and object based learning gain importance in higher education, recontextualising the kebaya in cinema as a teaching tool becomes essential for fostering cultural literacy, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary connections across fashion, history, and the social sciences (Tan, 2022; Noor & Abdullah, 2021).

This study investigates the representation of the kebaya in Malay films from 1950 to 2000 and situates these portrayals within an educational framework. Through an examination of its materiality, symbolism, and narrative function, the analysis identifies three core educational themes: modesty and ethics, socioeconomic class, and modern femininity. The findings demonstrate the value of incorporating the kebaya into teaching practices to enhance student engagement and cultural understanding, while contributing to broader discussions of tradition, modernity, and identity in Southeast Asia (Yusof, 2022; Chong, 2020).

Literature Review

There are five key areas discussed in this literature review, focusing on the cultural significance of the kebaya, its relevance in studio based learning, the role of digital pedagogy, the value of interdisciplinary approaches, and the opportunities for community engagement. These areas provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding how the kebaya functions not only as a cultural artefact but also as an educational resource within contemporary teaching and learning contexts.

Studio Based Learning

Recent studies emphasise the importance of object based and studio based learning in higher education. According to Yusof (2022), garments such as the kebaya support reflective thinking, detailed observation, and material analysis when introduced as learning objects.

This aligns with material culture approaches that view clothing as a catalyst for deeper engagement with form, craftsmanship, and cultural meaning. In the context of Malay cinema, the kebaya becomes a valuable studio based artefact through which students can examine fabric, silhouette, and construction as part of a hands on learning process.

Digital Pedagogy

Contemporary pedagogical research highlights the growing role of digital media in enhancing cultural learning. Tan (2022) argues that incorporating lived culture into digital teaching environments increases student engagement and comprehension. Similarly, Noor and Abdullah (2021) demonstrate that films and visual materials support critical awareness and cultural understanding. The presence of the kebaya in Malay films therefore provides a digital entry point for teaching cultural identity, ethics, and social behaviour through cinematic analysis and online archives.

Interdisciplinary Approaches

The kebaya operates at the intersection of fashion, culture, cinema, and identity studies. Research by Lee (2020) and Lim (2019) demonstrates that costume design in film communicates gender roles, class distinctions, and cultural narratives. Chong (2020) further highlights cinema's role in shaping collective memory and postcolonial identity. These interdisciplinary perspectives show that analysing the kebaya requires cross disciplinary dialogue between fashion studies, cultural studies, media studies, and sociology.

Community Engagement

The cultural significance of the kebaya extends beyond academic analysis into community heritage and identity formation. Aziz (2020) identifies kebaya variations as markers of regional identity, indicating their importance in local cultural expression. Hassan (2021) emphasises the role of cultural collections and archives in preserving community heritage. By connecting cinematic representation with lived cultural practices, the kebaya becomes a bridge between academic study and community understanding.

Opportunities for Pedagogical Innovation

Collectively, recent studies highlight new opportunities for incorporating the kebaya into teaching. Kamal (2023) notes the value of archives and collections for sustaining heritage learning, while Rahman (2021) points to the kebaya's contemporary relevance to femininity and identity. These insights suggest opportunities for curriculum development, digital archiving projects, collaborative film analysis, and culturally grounded teaching activities. The kebaya therefore presents a useful pedagogical resource for expanding cultural literacy, moral understanding, and interdisciplinary engagement.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative object oriented learning methodology to examine the kebaya as depicted in classic Malay cinema. The selected films are *Hang Tuah* (1956), *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), and *Masam Masam Manis* (1965), chosen for their strong visual representation of traditional Malay attire and their cultural influence within the golden era of local filmmaking. The analysis applies object based learning approaches commonly used in design and art education, focusing on the materiality, symbolism, and contextual significance of cultural artefacts. Supporting materials include film stills, museum exhibitions, and secondary literature

related to Malay attire, enabling a more comprehensive interpretation of the kebaya within historical and cinematic contexts. The study examines three core dimensions:

1. RO1: To analyse the materiality of Kebaya in classic Malay cinema.
2. RO2: To interpret the symbolic meanings conveyed through the styling and visual presentation of the kebaya.
3. RO3: To examine the contextual relationship between the kebaya, character portrayal, and narrative structure, and to reframe these findings for educational application.

Sources of Information and Search Method

This study utilised multiple information sources to ensure precision and academic rigour. The primary sources consisted of well known Malay films produced between 1950 and 2000, including *Hang Tuah* (1956), *Ibu Mertuaku* (1962), and *Masam Masam Manis* (1965). These films were selected for their strong association with the golden age of Malay cinema and their prominent depiction of the kebaya as a cultural garment. Archival stills, film posters, and museum collections were also consulted to strengthen the visual analysis of costume design and narrative context. Secondary materials included peer reviewed journals, academic books, and conference papers related to Malay costume, cultural identity, pedagogy, and film studies. Databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and JSTOR were systematically searched using relevant keywords including “kebaya,” “Malay films,” “cultural identity,” “fashion education,” “object based learning,” and “cultural pedagogy.” To ensure comprehensive coverage, sources published between 1990 and 2024 were prioritised, although earlier foundational works were also incorporated to provide essential historical context.

Analysis Data

The data collected for this study were primarily qualitative and included visual resources such as film stills, costume references, and archival photographs, as well as textual sources including museum notes and academic publications. Cinematic narratives were also examined to understand the kebaya within its cultural and story driven contexts. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring motifs and significant patterns related to the kebaya across the selected films and supporting materials.

Findings and Discussion

This study identifies three principal pedagogical themes, namely modesty and ethics, class stratification, and contemporary femininity. These themes demonstrate that the kebaya in Malay cinema functions not only as a form of cultural expression but also as a valuable educational tool that supports the development of cultural literacy and critical thinking.

Table 1: Themes of Kebaya Representation in Malay Cinema (1950–2000)

Theme	Film Examples	Cultural Meaning	Pedagogical Application
Modesty & Ethics	<i>Hang Tuah</i> (1956), <i>Ibu Mertuaku</i> (1962)	Symbol of morality, motherhood, Islamic values	Teaching cultural values, religious influences, and women’s role in society

Class Stratification	<i>Ibu Mertuaku</i> (1962)	Fabrics (silk vs. cotton), accessories show class divide	Exploring fashion as a marker of class and privilege
Femininity & Modernity	<i>Masam Masam Manis</i> (1965)	Urban style, independence, gender transformation	Teaching gender studies, modernisation, postcolonial identity

Source: Researcher's Own Analysis Based on Malay Film (2025)

Modesty and Ethics

The kebaya labuh, known for its loose silhouette and conservative design, is often associated with older women and maternal figures, symbolising modesty, propriety, and moral conduct in Malay cinema. These portrayals align with Islamic perspectives on aurat and reinforce the role of women as moral anchors within the family and community. In an educational context, this theme can help students understand how dress reflects cultural values, religious principles, and expected social behaviour.

Socioeconomic Class and Social Stratification

The choice of fabric, embellishment, and decorative detail frequently signals social class in classic Malay films. Wealthier women are portrayed wearing silk or satin kebayas with intricate embroidery, while rural or working class characters are dressed in simpler cotton versions. Accessories such as kerongsang (brooches) further reinforce distinctions of status and privilege. This theme supports classroom discussions on fashion as a marker of class hierarchy and encourages students to analyse how clothing communicates social structures.

Femininity and Modernisation

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the kebaya pendek became increasingly popular, reflecting shifts toward urban femininity and modern ideals. Cinematic portrayals of prominent female stars in these styles suggested autonomy, confidence, and the redefinition of gender norms in a rapidly modernising society. In teaching, this theme offers opportunities for students to critically explore the relationship between gender, fashion, and modernity in postcolonial Malaysia, highlighting how clothing both shapes and reflects evolving identities.

Challenges Identified

This study faced several challenges. The availability of historical materials posed a limitation, as many Malay films produced between the 1950s and 1970s are not fully preserved or accessible in high resolution, making detailed costume analysis dependent on limited visual resources. In addition, the scarcity of scholarly literature on the kebaya, compared with the more extensively studied baju kurung, required the incorporation of supplementary sources from broader cultural, fashion, and media studies. The interpretive nature of qualitative analysis also introduces subjectivity, as the cultural significance of clothing can vary across contexts, audiences, and generations.

From an educational standpoint, translating cinematic analysis into classroom practice presents further difficulties. Students may have limited prior exposure to classic Malay cinema, necessitating the provision of historical background before deeper discussion can take place. Certain cultural themes, including modesty and gender roles, may also generate sensitive

conversations that require careful facilitation to maintain inclusivity and respect. Despite these challenges, the integration of film, fashion, and education remains a valuable approach for promoting cultural literacy and encouraging critical engagement.

Opportunities and Advancement

Despite the limitations encountered, this study identifies several opportunities for future research and pedagogical development. The frequent appearance of the kebaya in Malay cinema offers a valuable resource for cultural education, allowing students to explore identity, tradition, and social transformation through fashion. The combination of object based learning and cultural pedagogy also supports multidisciplinary teaching that encompasses fashion design, media studies, sociology, and history.

Technological advancements enable the creation of digital archives and virtual exhibitions, expanding access to Malay films and costume documentation. These tools can support innovative teaching methods, including interactive film analysis modules, three dimensional visualisations of traditional attire, and integrated learning platforms. The cultural significance of the kebaya also encourages cross cultural dialogue, allowing comparative studies with other Southeast Asian garments such as the Vietnamese ao dai or the Chinese cheongsam. Together, these opportunities show that the kebaya supports heritage preservation and functions as a progressive educational tool that enhances cultural literacy and critical thinking.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the kebaya, as represented in Malay cinema from 1950 to 2000, extends beyond its role as traditional clothing to function as a cultural and educational lens. The garment reflects Malaysias evolving social norms related to modesty, ethics, class hierarchy, and modern femininity, making it a valuable resource for educators seeking to teach cultural identity and social behaviour. By integrating cinema and costume within qualitative, object based, and thematic analysis, the research illustrates how film can support critical thinking, cultural literacy, and interdisciplinary learning.

Although limitations exist, such as restricted archival access and the sensitivity of certain cultural themes, significant opportunities remain for innovation in fashion education, digital pedagogy, and cross cultural engagement. The kebaya in film serves not only as a historical symbol but also as a dynamic educational tool that bridges tradition and contemporary understanding. Future research could expand this framework by comparing the kebaya with other Southeast Asian attire, enriching cultural pedagogy and advancing instructional practice.

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