

# QUEERING THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF 'COMING OUT': THE REPRESENTATION OF MALE SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIP IN NIA DINATA'S *ARISAN*

Maimunah Munir

The University of Airlangga-Surabaya, Indonesia (maymunir@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of non-heterosexual sexuality as a theme in contemporary Indonesian films. Unlike the representation of male and female bonding in Indonesian films of the Suharto era, which tends to affirm the dominant hetero-patriarchal norms, a number of 2000s Indonesian films can be seen as negotiations of new understandings of sexual diversity. The paper specifically examines the representation of male same-sex relationships and intimacy in Nia Dinata's *Arisan!* (The Gathering) (2003). The paper has two basic questions. Firstly, how does the film strive to negotiate heteronormativity and homophobia? Secondly, how does the pattern of male non-heterosexual relationship suggest a breaking away from the dominant hetero-patriarchal norms? Queer film theory and Tom Boellstorff's (2005 and 2007) studies on *gay* and *lesbi* communities will be used as the primary approach. The paper also investigates the strategic devices used by the filmmaker to subvert censorship codes and social taboos in a country where non-heterosexual intimacy and friendship is accommodated, but homosexual identities remain outside the range of socially- and culturally-sanctioned subjectivities.

*Keywords:* *Queer, Coming-Out, Indonesian gay*

"Their lips locked for less than a second, but it was enough to make history. Until the release this month of *Arisan!*, cinema audiences in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, had yet to see two local men kissing on screen". (Djuhari, 2004)

This extract from the *Associated Press* report on the release of Nia Dinata's *Arisan!* (The Gathering) in 2003 captures the significance of a new phenomenon that began to ripple through the Indonesian film world in the early years of the 21st century. Long derided on cinema screens as figures of fun, people of non-normative sexualities were, in films like *Arisan!*, beginning to be portrayed in affirmative and non-discriminatory ways. Some filmgoers found it a disturbing

development. "I heard about the gay thing, but I wasn't prepared for the kiss. It's kind of sickening, don't you think?" one viewer commented to the international press (Soetjipto, 2004). For other metropolitan filmgoers, however, it was something unremarkable, and perhaps overdue. "It's very accurate because I've got friends like that and gay is not something that is very unusual in Jakarta. Everybody knows that," commented one viewer to the BBC's Jakarta correspondent (Harvey, 2004).

*Arisan!* quickly became box office hit, attracting more than 100,000 viewers in the third week of its screening in Jakarta. In a highly competitive cinema market dominated by foreign films (Soetjipto, 2004), this was a huge success. Local media joined in the commentary by the international press, and were quick to highlight the film's artistic and social significance. *Gatra*, a reputable weekly magazine, viewed *Arisan!* as mirroring Indonesia's ambivalent attitude toward same-sex relationships. It quoted the film director as saying that "we are living in modern world, where the conventional standard is no longer relevant. I want to call on everyone to be honest with themselves" (*Gatra*, 12 December 2003). The daily newspaper *The Jakarta Post* viewed *Arisan!* as "the first local movie to portray homosexuals in an unsensational, objective light" (Diani, 2003).

The approval of the kiss scene by the state's censorship institution and the commercial success of the film were indications that the change in cinematic representations of non-normative sexuality was part of a culture of change in the Indonesian film industry more generally. Unlike the New Order era, when the state viewed cinema as a "vehicle for the creation of a national culture" (Sen and Hill, 2000: 11), in the Reform era, film has come to be used in new ways, to communicate freedom of expression and creativity (van Heeren, 2002). Significantly, this understanding of "freedom of expression and creativity" encompasses a more liberal and exploratory approach to questions of gender and sexuality. For while the representation of sexuality in New Order Indonesian films centred on the female reproductive role, and tended to present the nation as constructed of heterosexual families rather than individual citizens (Boellstorff, 2005), a number of post-1998 Indonesian films offer new understandings of sexual diversity and individual subjectivity.

In the view of some observers, this development has been influenced by the emergence of a group of young generation of filmmakers who are more confident in depicting, among other controversial themes, topics related to sexuality and middle-class lifestyles. J.B. Kristanto notes that in the 1970s and 80s, Indonesian filmmakers failed to explore these topics, partly because they were alien to their own social backgrounds and lifestyles (2005: xvi). Their successors, however, are middle to upper class individuals who are technologically savvy, have graduated from Western academic institutions, and are more familiar with contemporary cultural and social discourses (Kristanto, 2001).

This new open approach to questions of non-normative sexuality in the film world has not gone unchallenged in the wider society. In Indonesia, as in other Asian countries, the discourse on homosexuality is determined by the interaction between cultural, religious and political factors, and liberal attitudes in one social

group are very likely to be countered by conservative political reactions in other quarters. As Offord and Cantrell (2001: 245) argue, "as homosexuality becomes more visible, there will be a legal and political response". Thus, far from being an uncomplicated celebration of same-sex relationships, it is clear that films such as *Arisan!* are part of a political contestation over issues related to sexual diversity in contemporary Indonesia.

### Queer Film Theory and "Indonesian Queer"

*Arisan!* as the primary data is studied as a cinematic text, with taking into account both form and style. As part of a film's form, narrative is the key element in shaping the film's overall meaning. As a system, it includes plot, story, space and time. However, as an art form, film differs from other aesthetic products, in that form is not its only aspect. Unlike the novel or painting, for example, film is a total experience (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008: 111). In the analysis of film text, the study has used published *Arisan!*'s screenplay as it provides comprehensive and important data on the background to the film, the filmmakers' intentions, the process of script writing as well as comments by members of the film crew (Dinata, 2004).

Qualitative methodology has been used in the collection of other forms of secondary data. In-depth interview with the filmmakers specifically Nia Dinata, *Arisan!*'s film director and Joko Anwar, the film's script writer were conducted to gain supplementary data on their perceptions of gender and sexual diversity. Interviews were conducted in person interview.

Meanwhile, queer film theory will be used here to understand non-normative sexuality and its representation in films. Benschoff and Griffin (2006: 9-10) suggest five criteria which might define a cinematic portrayal as "queer" film. Together, these five criteria refer to the interrelation between film, filmmaking and film spectators. Firstly, a film may contain queer characters and deal with queer issues. The second criterion is authorship. A film might be classified as a queer film if the directors, the producers or the film stars can be identified as queer. The third criterion by which a film may qualify as queer is queer spectatorship. A queer viewing position potentially offers a model of resistance reading resistance reading and challenges dominant perceptions of gender and sexuality. The fourth possibility is related to film genre. Horror and science fiction films can often be considered as queer in their representation of sexual identity as fluid, blurring the boundary of the real and the unreal. Lastly, factors involving the spectators' psychological processes may be considered. The act of identification with the queer characters may involve a questioning or a confirmation of the spectators' own gender and sexual identities. Benschoff and Griffin also suggest that queer theory is relevant to non-Western contexts, arguing that it "explores non-procreative sexualities in non-Western cultures, places, and eras that often have a vastly different understanding of human sexuality" (2004: 2).

In the Indonesian cultural context, Evelyn Blackwood argues, queer opens up the potential for the development of "a sense of a larger community of like-

minded individuals [*sama jiwa*],” in which all categories of non-normative sexual orientation can feel a “sense of imaginary space” (2005: 237). Dede Oetomo sees a further potential, arguing that it provides a way of avoiding the negative connotations associated with the earlier *gay* and *lesbian* categories, which in Indonesia have become associated with prejudice and social stigmatization. Queer is a more neutral and indirect term, a kind of *kromo inggil* [high Javanese] equivalent of *gay* in a culture that values euphemism and allusion in its discursive modes (Interview with Dede Oetomo, 19 July 2007).

The following discussion examines the cultural interpretation of the notion of queer sexuality in the specific context of contemporary Indonesian film. In other words, it proposes a culturally contingent interpretation of the concept of queer, referred to here as “Indonesian queer.” I would argue that the notion of “Indonesian queer” brings together both indigenous and “glocalized” embodiments of non-normative sexualities, drawing attention to the fact that both have their roots in Indonesian social and cultural identities.

### ***Arisan!* (The Gathering): A Non-Normative Representation**

Sakti, the male protagonist in *Arisan!* is a young urban “metrosexual” architect who is struggling with the denial of his homosexual orientation. As an only child in a Batak family, he is under strong pressure to marry and to preserve the continuity of his family lineage (*marga*). Sakti’s mother strives to match him with his *pariban*, Lita.<sup>1</sup> When Sakti is approached by Nino Aditya, an openly *gay* film director, he cannot hide his homosexuality. However, Sakti keeps his gayness secret, especially from his mother. One day, Sakti’s closest friend, Meimei, asks Sakti to join an *arisan*, a social club of wealthy women who share gossip and boast about their lives. In their monthly meetings, each *arisan* member proudly pretends that her life is perfect. Yet despite their luxurious lifestyles, they are all masking a range of personal problems. Meimei is a successful interior designer who is undertaking treatment for infertility because she perceives that her happiness in life depends on fulfilling her reproductive role. Andien is a wealthy woman who embarks on affairs with younger men after her husband discloses his infidelity. Sakti himself is struggling to “cure” his homosexuality. The three friends share a superficial relationship, filled with lies, until their masks crack and nothing is left but their friendship. As this happens, Sakti decides to come out to the *arisan* members, Meimei reveals her new status as a divorcee and Andien confesses to her love affairs. Most importantly, Sakti and Nino are accepted as a couple by Sakti’s family.

Released on 11 December 2003, *Arisan!* won several awards in 2004 Indonesian film festivals, including Best Picture, Best Director and Favourite Supporting Actor in the MTV Indonesia Movie Awards. It has been shown in many international film festivals and was awarded Best Picture and Most Popular Film in the Cinemasia Film Festival in Amsterdam in 2004. Directed by Nia Dinata, a young woman film director who is a graduate of New York University’s film production program, the success of *Arisan!* can be regarded as an indication of the

revival in the Indonesian film industry after the New Order era. Krishna Sen (2005) notes that it was the first time in the history of Indonesian film that a woman won a best director's award.

The moral message of the film narrative is "be yourself". Among other plotlines, the positive portrayal of *gay* characters is a most striking phenomenon in the context of the history of Indonesian film. Sakti and Nino are smart and successful professionals who speak English fluently, live in an apartment, and move through cafés or restaurants, an illustration of the modern identity lifestyles that can be found in almost every cosmopolitan city in the world. Moreover, they are not sissy and effeminate characters but "real men" who do not seem different from their heterosexual counterparts. In the context of Indonesian film history, the representation of the *gay* characters as *normal* men can be seen as a breakthrough, since in New Order film, male homosexual characters were only ever depicted as objects of fun, whose feminine behaviour and mannerisms confirmed the popular understanding that the gendered expression of male homosexuality was always associated with the *waria* subject position.<sup>2</sup> It can be said that *Arisan!* broadened the understanding of the relationship between sexuality and gender, "naturalising" *gay* subjectivity as a legitimate expression of same-sex identification and behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, the film presents a new image of Indonesian *gay* culture. However despite its overall positive reception, the film was criticised by some observers for its simplistic representation of the complexity of same-sex partnerships and the act of coming out in a patriarchal Batak family (*Kompas*, 6 December 2003). All these factors are explored below in an attempt to understand how the film illustrates the meaning of "Indonesian queer" through its challenging of monolithic and essentialist constructions of sexual diversity in Indonesia.

### Male Same-Sex Intimacy in the New Order's Film

It can be argued that male homosexual characters are typically portrayed in unsympathetic ways in Indonesian films of the New Order period. For instance, a male homosexual appears variously as a manic depressive in Bay Isbahi's *Tinggal Bersama* (1977), a rapist in Syamsul Hadi's *Remaja Lampu Merah* (1979), a symbol of moral decadence in Chaerul Umam's *Titian Serambut Dibelah Tujuh* (1982) and a killer in Wahyu Sihombing's *Istana Kecantikan* (1988). Nowhere in the history of New Order film is there any outspoken challenge to these stereotyped and clichéd representations. In this context, *Arisan!* was a remarkable breakthrough. Not only did it avoid the negative stereotypes of earlier films, it also escaped censorship of its more open depiction of sexual intimacy between the two male characters. As noted by Ben Murtagh (2006: 218) images of men embracing and kissing were cut from the 1988 film *Istana Kecantikan*, and the *Lembaga Sensor Film* (LSF/The Board of Film Censorship) added a propaganda statement: "homosexuality is deviant" to the film's ending (*Tempo*, 12 October 2003). Likewise, a *gay* kiss was cut from *Kuldesak* (Lesmana, 2007).

The different attitude to the representation of homosexual expression in *Arisan!* has two possible causes. Firstly, the less restrictive climate might be an

indication of freedom of expression in the post-New Order film culture and a liberalisation of Indonesian attitudes to sexual diversity. Released in the Reform era, *Arisan!* benefited from the new freedom of expression in politics, arts and the media. In this more open atmosphere, it is likely that the film was able to circumvent the existing censorship restrictions without attracting a negative response from the authorities or the public. Secondly, it is possible that the film manages to avoid censorship of its key images by the power of the film narrative itself. The filmmakers have taken great care to make the constructive image of homosexual culture seem an integral, normal and justifiable part of the urban environment the film portrays. Nino and Sakti's romantic affair appears perfectly "natural" and far from erotic or soft-core in flavour. The *gay* kiss may have been permissible because from the beginning of the plot, the two male characters make a great effort to communicate their strong feelings for each other. This, and the natural intimacy that gradually grows between them, is depicted carefully and sympathetically by the filmmakers.

This second reading suggests that the film's focus is very much on human relationships rather than sexual desire. Nino, as a self-identified *gay* filmmaker, is very confident, while Sakti, an introverted architect, fiercely hides his gayness. On his first date with Sakti, Nino assertively puts his hand on Sakti's shoulder. Shot in close up technique, this scene shows how Nino as a "real *gay*" recognises Sakti's homosexual desire. At this point, the camera moves to a close up of Nino's sexy wet lips as he drinks his coffee. As the camera focuses on Nino's lips, Sakti for his part is overcome by desire, and quickly reaches for his inhaler to calm his breathing and hide his sudden passion. But the inhaler does not solve his problem, and Sakti suddenly comes down with a headache. This scene provokes humour, but it also shows how Sakti is suffering from the pressure of hiding his emotions. Nino then takes Sakti to his studio, where the controversial *gay* kiss takes place. It functions as an indication that the two men are drawing closer to each other psychologically, as well as physically.

This natural *gay* romance scene can be read as an attempt to reconstruct the stereotypical image of homosexual culture, which frequently associates closeness between same-sex couples with sexual lust. Sakti's struggle to hide his sexual desire because of his position as an only child in a Batak family strongly evokes the audience's sympathy for his plight. Sakti himself is presented as a sociable and helpful man, who clearly enjoys his work and is liked by his colleagues. The *gay* kiss therefore becomes acceptable to the audience and does not change the audience's perception of Sakti as a positive character. *Tempo* (2 May 2005) reported that: "For the first time in the history of Indonesian film, *gay* affection – depicted in a warm and intimate kissing scene – is something that deserves acceptance, along with an understanding that this is a matter of love".

These comments are an indication of the way in which *Arisan!* succeeded in "naturalising" the depiction of *gay* characters and their lives. The film's images of male homosexual characters as "someone next door", no different from their *normal* counterparts, made *gay* life seem familiar and "natural". In this way, the film "queers" the stereotypical New Order pattern. Richard Dyer (1993: 16) argues

that the role of stereotypes is “to maintain sharp boundary definitions and to define clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and clearly beyond it”. In *Arisan!*, the boundary between the *normal* and *gay* world is challenged by the representation of the *gay* characters as equal partners in their interaction with other characters. For the audience, this can have the effect of challenging stereotypes and patterns of social interaction. Associated Press reported some viewers as saying it had changed their opinions on homosexuality. “I look at gays differently now, I can imagine...having a gay friend,” said one audience member (Djuhari, 2004).



Picture 1: Intimacy between Sakti and Nino

### The Middle-Class and the Gay Lifestyle

One way in which *Arisan!* legitimates the lifestyle of its *gay* protagonists is through their occupations. Sakti and Nino are successful white-collar workers who live in a modern and stylish environment. Their careers as architect and film director subvert the formulaic Indonesian *gay* stereotype which is frequently associated with beauty salon workers.<sup>4</sup> The beauty salon is a place recognised by many Indonesians as being linked to the *waria* and *gay* worlds. Boellstorff (2005: 137) notes that “salons are an important venue by which knowledge of the *gay* world (including *gay* language) crosses, however fitfully, into Indonesian popular culture”. For Sakti and Nino, their social space is larger and more dynamic than the segmented space of a beauty salon.

In terms of social class, *Arisan!* reinforces the association of *gay* culture with middle and upper-class lifestyles. As Dede Oetomo (1996: 263) argues, *gay* is usually a more Westernized, middle-class construction, referring to wealthier men who frequent at expensive discos and are more modern than their *waria/banci*

counterparts. Boellstorff (2007: 198), however, suggests that this association between gay and economic status is a common misperception, in Southeast Asia as in the West. Mass media tends to reinforce this view, presenting gay men throughout Southeast Asia "as closeted business executives or movie stars". According to Boellstorff, Indonesian *gay* men can come from any social class background, and their occupations "have the same range as other Indonesian men" (2005: 144).

In line with Boellstorff's argument, Chris Berry, in his reading of *Arisan!*, criticises the tendency of Asian gay films to link the *gay* life with the upper class and modernity (2004: 306). He describes this phenomenon as "the *Wedding Banquet* effect", representing Asian queer culture as equated to Western-derived and elite global capitalist culture. "There is no poverty in *Arisan!*, no local *waria* transgender cultures, no working class same-sex culture and no Islam either" (Berry, 2004: 306). Berry seems concerned that the cosmopolitan attitudes seen in many Asian queer films potentially establish a homogenisation of Asian queer culture.

Commenting on Berry's article, Nia Dinata argues that the association between *gay* identity and middle or upper class lifestyles is a reflection of social reality. She claims that it is easier for upper class *gay* men to survive in a heterosexist society like Indonesia because they are socially and economically independent. "If you have enough money, a good career and are socially independent, being *gay* is easier," she says (Personal Interview with Nia Dinata, 13 August 2007). Dinata's optimism in relation to the experience of Indonesian *gay* men may be questionable. In Indonesian social interaction, it is clear that it is the *waria* working class who are most visible and who have developed socially-acceptable survival strategies that in some cases are denied to more closeted upper class *gay* men. Nevertheless, as Boellstorff (2005: 57) argues, the visibility of *waria* does not always mean acceptance. In general, as Oetomo also notes, greater social acceptance is still a long way off, since "most Indonesians are tolerant of gays, lesbians, transsexuals and transvestites as long they are not family or friends, even though many young urban Indonesians are now willing to accept the gay lifestyle" (cited in Djuhari, 2004). Consistent with these views, *Arisan!* represents the upper class and modern *gay* world as a part of Indonesian urban culture in which homosexuality is possibly more accepted. Chris Berry and Fran Martin (2003: 87) argue that "in the Asian global context, the emergence public lesbian, gay and queer cultures most frequently appear along with late capitalism, the rise of the middle class, consumer culture, urbanization and modernity". While Berry and Boellstorff may be correct in suggesting that *gay* sexuality can also be found outside this social context, and is much more diverse in its expression than a film like *Arisan!* would suggest, it is arguably the most complete expression of an Asian homosexual lifestyle that these films represent.

### Coming Out and the Rhetoric of Happiness

Many of the film reviews and reports on *Arisan!* emphasised the psychological struggle and social process of coming out. A review by Ekky Imanjaya (2006: 129),



for example, suggests that a more accurate title for the film would be "*Coming Out*" in view of the fact that Sakti's coming out story dominates the whole of the film narrative. Similarly, the Associated Press report by Lely T. Djuhari (2004) asserts that "the film's plot centres on an architect's eventual coming out as a gay man". The coming out storyline in the film needs to be explored, since according to Boellstorff, the notion and act of coming out is one of the most important indicators of the differences between Western and Indonesian *gay* sensibilities. In the Western cultural context, the act of coming out is often perceived as an affirmative act of pride, while remaining in the closet is a sign of self-loathing and oppression. However, for the majority of Indonesians with same-sex orientation, "coming out" means nothing more than becoming part of a like-minded community, developing a sense of solidarity with other members of the *gay/lesbian* word and enlarging their networks of friends. For them, confessing their sexual preference to the *normal* world is simply irrelevant, if not also dangerous (Boellstorff, 2005: 174, 2007: 49).

Nevertheless, with the international spread of the *gay* movement, the Western concept of coming out has unavoidably influenced *gay* culture in non-Western societies. Song Hwee Lim, in his study of contemporary homosexual Chinese film culture, argues that "the closet is not is not a single space, nor is coming out a single and simple act" (2006: 53). In Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), the act of coming out takes different forms and produces different responses. Lim shows that after "coming out" to his loving mother, and then being "outed" to his more distant father, the *gay* protagonist Wai Tung receives an unexpected, and quite ironic, response. His mother does not readily understand the meaning of coming out, or even of same-sex desire, while Wai Tung's father, from whom all the other family members conspire to keep secret his sexual identity, seems to accept his son's *gayness* more easily than his wife does. Lim believes that "the film makes a forceful case for the danger in equating the act of coming out with the increased acceptance of same-sex sexuality" in non-western cultural contexts (2006: 52).

Sakti's confession to his fellow *arisan* members (here, the *normal* world), which is portrayed as an effort to "be himself" seems alien to the mainstream Indonesian *gay's* understanding of the concept of coming out. I would argue that Sakti's coming out story is intended not as a realistic representation of Indonesian *gay* culture, but as an illustration of how an Indonesian *gay* man can be accepted in the *normal* world if his coming out is handled in a gradual and non-confrontational way. The beginning of this process is self-acceptance. In the middle of the plot, Nino gradually convinces Sakti that it is futile to keep on denying his real self. When Sakti joins the *arisan* club, Nino spontaneously comments that friendship with women is an "OGT" (Obvious Gay Trait). In this way, Nino is telling Sakti that his *gayness* is obvious, and it is useless for him to keep resisting it (at least) in front of Nino himself. Even more significantly, Sakti's (female) psychiatrist, whom he consults in an effort to "cure" his homosexuality, takes the view that his sexual orientation is not an "illness", but a psychological problem for Sakti himself to overcome. Just as Nino encourages Sakti to feel comfortable in the company of other *gay* men, so the psychiatrist tries to convince him that self-acceptance and

confidence in his own identity is the first step towards social acceptance and recognition.

Beyond these psychological aspects, however, *Arisan!* also suggests that coming out requires a level of personal achievement in public life. As part of his attempts to encourage Sakti to come out, Nino tries to persuade Sakti that a person is accepted by his community on the basis of his personal and professional achievements (*prestasi*), not merely by his sexual orientation. "*Aku rasa kamu tidak perlu takut, orang gak akan meninggalkan kamu hanya karena kamu gay, karena kamu punya banyak hal yang perlu dibanggakan.*"<sup>5</sup> This scene can be seen as evidence of the way the filmmakers conceptualise the significance of coming out and the meaning of being *gay*. Personality and achievement (*prestasi*) are pre-requisites for survival. It is arguable that *Arisan!* encourages (queer) viewers to consider their position and status in the *normal* world before deciding to come out.

The association of coming out with happiness can be identified in the film poster which labels *Arisan!* "a happy picture about unhappy people". This implies that the act of coming out is the key to being a happy *gay*. Dede Oetomo (2001: 215) argues that staying in the closet causes psychological pressure, while coming out represents an honest acceptance of the real condition of one's sexual orientation. Oetomo's argument equates to Nino's perspective that coming out is the first step towards freedom from fear and guilt.

*Tapi seenggaknya aku nggak harus berurusan sama masalah-masalah lama yang itu-itu aja, takut orang tau, merasa bersalah. Setelah kamu lepas dari ketakutan-ketakutan itu, rasanya gak bisa diucapin dengan kata-kata. Kayaknya beban yang udah lama banget nyangkut di pundak kamu terasa diangkat.*<sup>6</sup>

Nino's encouragement powerfully reflects the belief that honestly proclaiming one's sexual identity is a pre-requisite for happiness. For Nino, coming out is equivalent to honesty, and happiness can only be reached when a *gay* becomes "himself". By contrast, staying in the closet equates to hypocrisy and unhappiness. The film's moral message thus clearly endorses the Western concept of coming out: the first priority for happiness is the need for self-honesty.

The act of coming out seems to affect Sakti's attitude to his closest friends. In the post-coming out phase, he is portrayed as more confident, happier and unafraid to reveal his sexual identity. For instance, at the end of the film, Andien and Meimei confess that during senior high school, they both fell in love with Sakti. "*Padahal waktu SMA gue pernah naksir elo.*"<sup>7</sup> Sakti replies spontaneously in *ngondek* style:<sup>8</sup> "*Cucian deh loe berdua.*"<sup>9</sup> This adoption of an effeminate mannerism at the end of the film can be interpreted as a symbol of Sakti's self-confidence as a *gay* man in the intimate space of his close personal relationships. In this way, *Arisan!* differs from *The Wedding Banquet*, because it equates the act of coming out with increased personal confidence and increased social acceptance of same-sex sexuality. Sakti's coming out decision gives him entry into a life as confident and happy *gay* man.

**Don't Ask Don't Tell: The Silent Acceptance Strategy<sup>10</sup>**

Another important aspect of *Arisan!* is the way in which Grace, Sakti's mother, peacefully accepts her son's homosexuality. Some commentators criticised this aspect of the plot as unrealistic. A film review published in *Kompas* (6 December 2003), for example, asserts that Grace's uncomplicated acceptance is the most simplistic aspect of the whole film narrative structure. In Batak culture, the role of a son is pivotal in the continuation the familial system (*marga*), and although Grace is depicted as a modern if overprotective mother, she strongly expects to have a daughter-in-law of the same ethnicity. "*Nyokap njodohin gua dengan perempuan dari Padang Sidempuan.*"<sup>11</sup> It is actually in consideration of his mother's hopes that Sakti makes such a strong attempt to deny his gayness. The thought of confessing his non-normative sexual orientation to his mother is the most difficult thing in his life. Sedgwick (1990: 80) argues that "when gay people in a homophobic society come out [...] perhaps especially to parents or spouses, it is with the consciousness of a potential for serious injury that is likely to go in both directions". In Sakti's case, however, there is no possibility of "serious injury" because Sakti never directly confesses to Grace. Quite different from *The Wedding Banquet* as well as *Istana Kecantikan*, *Arisan!* portrays Sakti's coming out to his mother as an accidental event. Sakti never has to confess, because his intended wife Lita, and later Grace herself, unintentionally witness an emotional exchange between Sakti and Nino that reveals Sakti's sexual orientation to them.

Although Grace is surprised to know that her son is *gay*, she does not react negatively. She is, as always, protective and resourceful, and does everything to keep her son happy. By contrast, Sakti is shocked when Nino discloses that his mother knows about their relationship. He cries and accuses Lita and Nino of being trouble makers. Grace's attitude can be viewed as the film's way of advocating a non-violent process of coming out: "*Sakti anakku satu-satunya, aku hanya mau ia senang.*"<sup>12</sup> Grace's peaceful reaction may reflect Indonesian feminine ways of handling uncomfortable situations: not speaking of them, not raising the subject, everyone just respecting each other, an Indonesian version of the *don't ask, don't tell* principle. Kecia Ali (2006: 86) argues that the *don't ask, don't tell* norm makes sense in some Muslim countries on a practical level as a strategy to avoid persecution and prosecution of sexual minorities, and for circumventing a greater family conflict. Sakti never tells Grace and Grace never asks. But her acceptance of Nino can be seen when all the family members are ready for dinner. She spontaneously invites Nino to join them for dinner, and Sakti is shocked but pleasantly surprised by his mother's sympathetic attitude to his lover.

Grace: (to Sakti) *Awaslah kau, biar aku bikin makan malam dulu.*  
 (to Nino) *Kau ikut makan malam di sini, kan?*  
 Nino: *Ya.*<sup>13</sup>

This dialogue takes places in Grace's kitchen, a private familial space which symbolises her acceptance for Nino as a new family member. Grace is

behind the camera near Sakti, who wipes away a tear. Her command to Sakti ("Move over, let me make dinner") reflects the influential position she has occupied in Sakti's entire life. Without paying much attention to Sakti, Grace starts to cook. For her, cooking and preparing the dinner seems to be more important than discussing Sakti's gayness (or perhaps, along the lines of the *don't ask, don't tell* principle, it is her way of avoiding talking about the subject). Everything seems fine and controlled. Asking Nino to join the family dinner is the key expression of her moral support. *Don't ask, don't tell* does not necessarily require verbal acknowledgment; it can also take the form of a non-verbal or silent "cultural expression" of acceptance.

### Coming Out as Coming Home

Another important aspect of the successful process of coming out is the *gay* partner's willingness to be accepted as a family member. As the film shows, coming out and the *don't ask, don't tell* strategy function more easily if there is a warm relationship between the *gay* partner and the parent. From their first meeting, Nino does everything he can to develop a personal relationship with Grace, as a way of easing the process of family acceptance. In his first encounter with Grace, during an *arisan* party in her garden, Nino assertively introduces himself as Sakti's friend, and takes the initiative in building up a personal rapport with her by talking to Grace about her interest in flowers and gardening.

- Nino: *Saya Nino, tante, teman Sakti dan Meimei. Tadi saya denger tante suka tanaman ya?*  
 Grace: *Ya, memang.*  
 Nino: *Kebetulan saya juga. Tante sukanya apa ?*  
 Grace: *Aku suka hibiscus.*  
 Nino: *Ooo kembang sepatu. Saya juga paling suka, tante. Saya punya yang Lemon Chiffon lho.*  
 Grace: *Serius kau!*  
 Nino: *Nanti saya setekin ya, tante.*<sup>14</sup>

Nino's attempt to win Grace's sympathy is his way of developing a positive image for himself as a close friend of Sakti. Later, when the relationship between Sakti and Nino becomes closer, Grace feels able to let Nino know that she has observed, and understood, the nature of their "friendship":

- Nino: *Saya lagi nyari Sakti, tante. Hp nya nggak aktif terus.*  
 Grace: *Si Sakti memang begitu kadang-kadang kalo lagi merajuk. Kau sama si Sakti lagi bertengkar?*  
 Nino: *Hh nggak, tante.*  
 Grace: *Ah, nggak perlu lah kau tipu-tipu orang tua. Aku tau lah.*  
 Nino: *Maksud tante?*  
 Grace: *Ingat waktu arisan, kemarin?*<sup>15</sup>

This exchange suggests that Grace knows about their relationship and is willing to accept Nino into her family. From his side, Nino has succeeded in breaking down the distinction between the insider and outsider, between the parent and his position as her son's partner. Grace's body language when she gently touches Nino's shoulder indicates her acceptance of Nino. In the next scene, the film flashes back to the incident when Grace and Lita overhear Sakti and Nino talking about their relationship, as a way of confirming for the audience that she is fully aware of Sakti and Nino's gayness.

Nino's successful attempt to enter into his partner's family circle implies that part of his motivation in encouraging Sakti to "come out" is to strengthen his relationship with his mother, and make sure that his coming out is at the same time a process of coming home. In this way, *Arisan!* depicts coming out not as a process of leaving the family space, as is often the case in the West, but integrating the sexual with the socio-cultural. In the Indonesian cultural context, this is important, because greater social acceptance for the homosexual couples begins in the familial space. As Dede Oetomo (2001: 220) has commented:

In Asia, in particular, the focus of our fight for an alternative sex life or form of love is above all within the family. In the family domain, we face the biggest obstacles. These obstacles are especially significant as our families are so important to us. Some of us have been brave enough to begin a dialogue with our families, with varying results. But some of us still avoid this kind of openness. Some of us have run away to begin a new life elsewhere, finding work in a place far away from our families. It is time for all of us living in families to learn about the variety of human life [...] and create a family atmosphere which supports a variety of expressions of difference.

Coming out as coming home means that the family is no more an oppressive institution but a central space in which the queer characters receive the greatest room for personal growth and moral support. In this way, *Arisan!* works to integrate a key feature of gay identity formation in the West with local cultural norms and values. In suggesting that a successful process of coming out involves a tripartite relationship between the queer subject, the partner and the parent, the film encourages its queer viewers to integrate sexuality and culture, to ensure that "coming out" also means "coming home".<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

The *gay* world in *Arisan!* is happy, independent and optimistic. The film directly challenges homophobic attitudes by showing the acceptance of its *gay* characters and their lifestyles by the medical profession and their close family and friends. The absence of Sakti's father merely aids in his process of coming out. The sympathetic images of *gay* culture in *Arisan!* challenge the boundary between the

*normal* and *gay* world and represent them as equal. Sakti and Nino are well-integrated with their heterosexual counterparts. They have the autonomy to find and develop their lives in both domestic and public spaces. The film presents positive images of queer self-identified characters as a *normal* couple. Sakti and Nino are not sissy and effeminate characters but gender-conforming men. In the process to challenge the heteronormative bias of Indonesian film culture, *Arisan!* can be seen as pioneering examples of Indonesian queer cinema.

It should be noted that the representation of queerness is depicted in this film in relation to family and society. Queer-identified characters such as Sakti and Nino have to reconcile their normative family roles with their non-normative sexual orientations. Representing queerness as a family problem is relevant to Dede Oetomo's argument that family acceptance is the most challenging phase in the lives of Indonesian queer subjects (2001: 220). Interestingly, Sakti chooses to return to his family space, "coming home" as his mother's *gay* son. Chris Berry (2001: 224) argues that if the Anglo-American films tend to portray gayness as leaving the space of family unit, East Asian films such as the Taiwanese film *The Wedding Banquet* (Taiwan, 1993), *Okoge and Twinkle* (Japan, 1992) and *Broken Branches* (South Korea, 1995) suggest "an effort (however strained) to integrate gayness with the obligations of traditional family roles" (Berry, 2001: 224). By contrast, in post-Stonewall Hollywood film, the absence of blood family was replaced by an extended family which consists of "an entire network of friends functioning as a chosen family" (Berry, 2001: 225). This pattern can be found in lesbian films such as Rose Troche's *Go Fish* (1994) and Norman Rene's 1990 AIDS film *Longtime Companion*.

The analysis of the film also confirms the usefulness of "queer" as a cross-cultural and transnational discursive framework for exploring expressions of non-normative sexuality. Applied to Indonesia, it draws attention to the links and commonalities between long-recognised indigenous expressions of transgenderism and transsexuality, and the localised expressions of the global sexual cultures which grew out of the Western feminist and gay liberation movements of the second half of the twentieth century. In other words, "Indonesian queer" brings together both indigenous and "glocalised" embodiments of non-normative sexualities, drawing attention to the fact that both have their roots in Indonesian social and cultural realities.

I would argue that it is the relationship between sexuality, kinship and social responsibility that is the most striking characteristic of the cinematic representation of "Indonesian queer". The enactment of sexuality and the notion of sexual and gender identity are never seen in isolation from the individual's relation to family and society. Unlike the Western model, where individuality and sexual affirmation tend to be seen as the building blocks of an individual's personal identity, queerness in an Indonesian subject is always seen in relation to the individual's struggle to locate themselves within their family and social environment. In *Arisan!*, the struggle to integrate the sexual with the socio-cultural, as suggested in the understanding of "coming out" as "coming home" becomes a

localised, or Indonesian, strategy to circumvent a greater family conflict, so affirming the importance of family and local cultural norms.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>*Pariban* usually refers to an extended family member, often a second cousin, who is identified as a potential marriage partner. Arranged marriages according to the *pariban* system are quite common in the internal Batak extended family as a way of continuing the family line (*marga*).

<sup>2</sup> As Dede Oetomo (1996: 261) has noted, even a highly educated government official, the Director of Film Control in the New Order era could not distinguish the difference between *waria* and non-conforming male homosexual. At the screening of Wahyu Sihombing's 1988 film, *Istana Kecantikan*, the director classified the film as being about "*banci/waria*", not "*gay*".

<sup>3</sup> It can be argued, however, that the legitimization of *gay* sexuality in *Arisan!* has negative consequences for the Indonesian queer community as a whole. This is evident in the film when Sakti rejects the approaches of Iyunk, an effeminate male photographer who tries to attract his attention. In this scene, the metro-sexual *gay* character shows his distance from the *banci*, the character who signifies a different, and more indigenous, expression of queer sensibility.

<sup>4</sup> This is depicted in the characterisation of Nico in *Istana Kecantikan*, for example.

<sup>5</sup> "I don't think you have to worry; people will not leave you just because you are *gay*, and you have a lot to be proud of."

<sup>6</sup> But at least, I won't have to deal with the same old issues forever, that guilt, the fear that someone might find out. After you are free from those fears, the feeling is indescribable. It feels like a heavy stone you have been carrying has finally been lifted from your back.

<sup>7</sup> "You know, I used to have a crush on you in senior high school."

<sup>8</sup> Boellstorff (2005: 166, original emphasis) defines *ngondek* as "opposed to masculinity (*macho*, *maskulin* *kebapakan* [derived from *bapak*, 'father'], or *laki-laki asli* [authentic man]), *ngondek* is a male body's performing of feminine gender at a slight remove. It is the normative but not essential style of *gay* subjectivity".

<sup>9</sup> "I pity you both" (but said in a way that is suggestive of what in the West would be a campish flick of the wrist).

<sup>10</sup> The catch-phrase *don't ask, don't tell* has its origins in a statement by U.S. President Clinton in 1993 that was intended to clarify the position of homosexuals in the U.S. military. From this point, the official U.S. attitude was that "gay service personnel could remain in the military as long as they did not declare their sexual preference or engage in homosexual conduct" (Foerstel, 1997: 108). Some gay activists argued that the policy was homophobic since it restricted freedom of speech (Hekma, 2006: 353). In this discussion, I use the phrase to describe *Arisan!*'s depiction of a strategy of acceptance within the constraints of Indonesian cultural norms, and in that sense I give the term an essentially positive meaning.

<sup>11</sup> "My mum is trying to fix me up with a girl from Padang Sidempuan."

<sup>12</sup> "Sakti is my only child. I just want him to be happy."

<sup>13</sup> Grace: (to Sakti) Move over, let me make dinner.

(to Nino) You will stay for dinner, won't you, Nino?

Nino: Yes, I will.

<sup>14</sup> Nino: Hello, I'm Nino. A friend of Sakti's and Meimei. I heard that you like plants?

Grace: Yes, I do, very much.

Nino: Me too, what do you like?

- 
- Grace: I like hibiscus.  
 Nino: Hibiscus? Me too. I've got the Lemon Chiffon.  
 Grace: Really?  
 Nino: I'll take a cutting for you, if you like.  
<sup>15</sup> Nino: I'm looking for Sakti. His mobile phone is turned off all the time.  
 Grace: He's like that sometimes when he's sulking. Are you having a fight with him?  
 Nino: Oh...no.  
 Grace: You don't have to pretend. I may be old but I'm not blind.  
 Nino: What do you mean?  
 Grace: Do you remember the *arisan*?
- <sup>16</sup> Shan (2000: 263) suggests that in Asia, especially in Chinese *tongzhi* (same-sex) relationships, the establishment of tripartite relationships has proved to be an effective way of negotiating the process of coming out and receiving family acceptance.

## References

- Ali, K. (2006). *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*. Oxford: One World.
- Benshoff, H. M, and Sean G. 2004. *Queer Cinema: the Film Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Berry, C. (2004). Coalition Politics: Queer Matters Today in Re-Placing Queer Studies: Reflections on the Queer Matters Conference. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6 (2):305-307.
- — — 2001. Asian Values, Family Values: Film, Video and Lesbian and Gay Identities. In *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, edited by G. Sullivan and P. A. Jackson. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Blackwood, E. (2005). Transnational Sexualities in One Place: Indonesian Readings. *Gender and Society* 19 (2):221-242.
- Boellstorff, T. (2005). *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- — —. 2007. *Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies and Indonesia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Bordwell, D, and Kristin T. 2008. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: MC Graw Hill.
- Diani, H. (2003, December 7) *Arisan!* an Achingly Funny Slice of Life. *The Jakarta Post*.
- Dinata, N. (2004). *Arisan!: Skenario dan Kisah-Kisah di Balik Layar*. Jakarta: Gramedia.
- Djuhari, L.T. (2004, January 19). Pacific Currents: Gay Kiss Makes Film History in Indonesia. *Associated Press*.
- Dyer, R. (1993). *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*. London: Routledge.
- Foerstel, H. N. (1997). *Free Expression and Censorship in America: An Encyclopedia*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Gatra. (2003, December 12). Standar Konvensional Sudah tak Laku..



- 
- Harvey, R. (2004, 15 January). Indonesia Embraces First Gay Screen Kiss. *BBC News Channel*.
- Hekma, G. (2006). The Gay World: 1980 to the Present. In *Gay Life and Culture: A World History*, edited by R. Aldrich. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Imanjaya, E. (2006). *A to Z about Indonesian Film*. Bandung: Mizan Media Utama.
- Lesmana, M. (2007). Indonesian Film Society: Toward a Better Protection and Support for Film Industry: Public Lecture at the University of Melbourne.
- Kompas*. (2003, December 6). Arisan!: Topeng Orang-Orang Kota.
- Kristanto, J.B. (1995). *Katalog Film Indonesia 1926-1995*. Jakarta: Grafi Asri Mukti.
- — —. (2005). *Katalog Film Indonesia 1926-2005*. Jakarta: Nalar.
- Lim, S. H. (2006). *Celluloid Comrades: Representation of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Martin, F. (2003). *Situating Sexuality: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Murtagh, B. (2006). Istana Kecantikan: the First Indonesian Gay Movie. *South East Asia Research* 14 (2):211-230.
- Oetomo, D. (1996). Gender and Sexual Orientation in Indonesia. In *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, edited by L. J. Sears. Durham: Duke University Press.
- — —. (2001). *Memberi Suara pada yang Bisu*. Jakarta: Galang Press.
- Offord, B and Leon C. (2001). Homosexual Rights in Indonesia and Australia in *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, edited by G. Sullivan and P. A. Jackson. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. London: Harvester/Wheat sheaf.
- Sen, K. (2005). Women are now on Both Sides of the Cinema. (Retrieved 5 December 2006), Available from <http://insideindonesia.org/content/view/155/29/>.
- Sen, K, and David T H. (2000). *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shan, C. W. (2000). *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Soetjipto, T. (2004, January 1). Indonesian Movie Breaks Sexual Taboos. *Reuters Tempo*. (2003, October 12) Merayakan Erotika Queer: dari Salon Langsung ke Layar Putih, 71-85.
- — —. (2005, May 2). Saya Dekat Sekali dengan Dunia Gay.
- van Heeren. K. (2002). Developments and Movements of New Indonesian Film. *IIAS Newsletter* 28