

***The Significance of the Concept of Budi in the Malay Worldview: An Analysis of the Malaysian Animated Film Putih***

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the Malay moral values based on the concept of *Budi* and its application through the portrayal of selected characters in the Malaysian animated film *Putih* (2001). The method of analysis employs the academic study of Lim Kim Hui (2003a)'s *Budi* and its networks (*akal, hati, bicara, bahasa/pekerti* and *daya*) and it includes my attempt to argue that the thought processes as well as actions of the characters reflect the Malay cultural values originated from the concept of *Budi*. The Malay society gives importance to achieving as well as preserving harmony rather than personal gain and *Budi* governs the rules concerning their relationship. The practice of *Budi* which is often associated with positive values can also be discussed from the negative aspect. The characters with the understanding of the Malay culture both practice and manipulate *Budi* to suit their roles as either the protagonist or antagonist in the animated film. The protagonist who stays true to the value of *Budi* practices it with moderation and is set to be an example of an ideal Malay individual. On the other hand, the opposing characters manipulate *Budi* in order to fulfil their evil schemes. Consequently, my paper attempts to argue that the concept of *Budi* is extremely significant in the Malay worldview through the analysis of the characters in the animated film *Putih*.

Keywords: *Budi*, *Budi* networks, Malay worldview, Malay culture

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## Introduction

In this paper, I will analyse the Malaysian animated film *Putih* (2001) and examine how the Malay concept of *Budi* functions as a primary influence for constructing and motivating the major characters and their actions in the film. *Putih* is produced by a subsidiary of Eurofine called Fine Animation (Hassan Muthalib, 2016) and it is the second animated film produced in Malaysia. Besides being inspired by the well-known Malaysian and Indonesian folklore *Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah* (translated as garlic and shallot), it also follows a plotline which is similar to the notable Western fairy tale *Cinderella*. It recounts the story of a young beautiful, kind and humble Malay girl who endures a miserable existence with her stepmother *Mak Kundur* as well as her stepsister *Merah* in the Malay Peninsula during earlier times. After enduring severe oppression and maltreatment, *Putih*'s life takes a fortunate turn when she accidentally meets and eventually marries a prince named *Putera Aftus*. In the course of my analysis, I will particularly focus on the behaviour and actions demonstrated by the protagonists, *Putih*, her mother *Labu/ Mak Labu*, her stepmother *Kundur/ Mak Kundur* and her stepsister *Merah* by utilizing the motifs signified by the concept of *Budi* in order to argue that the concept of *Budi* is intrinsic to the fundamental ethos of the Malay world-view.

## The Concept of *Budi* in the Malay Worldview

In Malaysia, the concept of *Budi* belongs to the category which represents goodness. During ancient times, the Malays believed that humans consist of the mind and body. The body, along with its organs, will eventually perish, but not the "mind". In this context, the "mind" is related to the elements of the unseen such as thoughts, feeling, *nyawa* (life), *semangat* (soul/spirit) as well as the remnants of what has been left such as *Budi* (kindness, virtue etc) and *Badi* (bad influence). According to Ismail Hamid (1991), *semangat* is divided into good and bad. The good *semangat* is associated with paddy (*semangat padi*), while *semangat jahat* (evil spirit) is often associated with *biawak* (monitor lizard). Based on his findings on various proverbs, Lim (2003a) believes that *Budi* originates from the concept of *semangat padi* and that the notion of *Budi* is developed due to existing Malay proverbs which associate paddy with the virtues of *Budi*. This is the basis of what the Malays believe during an occurrence of an event caused by either the *semangat baik* (good spirit) or *semangat jahat* (evil spirit). Hence the worldview of the Malays back then has established and laid the foundation of the dualistic opposing understanding of good as well as bad and today, the evolution of cultures and beliefs in Malaysia has further enhanced and shaped the values of what outlines the comprehension of goodness.

The Malays are often described as gentle and polite, displaying humility as well as being cautious when speaking or behaving in order to present good character and conduct which is also known as *sopan santun* (social grace). These positive traits relate to *Budi*, a term originated from the Sanskrit word *Buddhi*, meaning wisdom, understanding or intellect. *Budi* is not to be labelled a simple term because it carries with it more than one meaning and therefore, should be perceived as '*Budi complex*' (Romlah Ramli, 2013), which in the Malay vocabulary is further extended to include ethics to accommodate the culture as well as the ways of thinking. Tham (1970) suggests that the Malay social relationships revolve around the '*Budi complex*'. It constructs the idea for individuals to behave in accordance to positive values such as

generosity, respect, sincerity, righteousness and discretion. Individuals should also incorporate the feeling of shame and embarrassment for themselves and for others. This encourages a person to be sensitive and concerned for oneself as well as other people (Dahlan, 1991). Although many recent studies on *Budi* have emerged in the past decade (Aminudin Mansor, 2008; Abdul Halim Ali, 2009; Noor Aina, 2011; Hashim Musa, Normahdiah, Rozita , & Siti Sarah, 2012; Zaireeni, 2014; Abdul Malik, 2015; Nor Hashimah , 2015; Wan Norhasniah, 2016), I will focus on Lim Kim Hui's analysis of the concept of *Budi*. Lim Kim Hui is one of the primary predecessors who has initiated the process of exploring *Budi* within an academic context. His analysis is based on examining the Malay proverbs in order to construct a structural analysis of the Malay ways of thinking and behaving, which I believe is relevant and helpful to my research.

The values of the Malay culture have undergone evolutions in their beliefs from animism to Hinduism, from Buddhism to Islam (Winstedt, 1982). Islam was introduced to the Malays during the rise of the great port of Malacca back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and today, *Budi* in the Malay worldview is heavily associated with the values taught in Islam (Aminudin Mansor, 2008; Hashim Musa, 2008; Hashim Musa, Normahdiah, Rozita , & Siti Sarah, 2012; Abdul Malik, 2015), which has become the national religion of Malaysia. The teachings of Islam encourage the use of politeness in language, which in a way reflects the *akal Budi* of the Malays. It also outlines the manners for interaction that forbids Muslims from offending or disrespecting others. Islam is a religion that promotes courtesy as well as gentleness of speech. It also promotes practicing moderation that will elevate one's dignity as well as personality. In addition, mannerism of speeches as outlined by the Islamic ethics will lead its practitioners to be respected by others and at the same time generate harmony between religion, race, and nation (Norfazila Ab. Hamid , Nasimah Abdullah, & Lubna Abd. Rahman, 2017). Although the concept of *Budi* and Islam are closely associated with each other, the concept of *Budi* as Lim has researched however, focuses on the ancient Malay minds, prior to the arrival of Islam. Lim has suggested that according to the Malay worldview, the purpose of an argument is the search for truth, goodness and beauty. It is not to determine a winner of the argument but to leave each party with positive values that can be practiced and passed down to the next generation. The Malays view direct confrontations as an impolite action because of the risk of displaying certain behaviours or speeches might embarrass oneself as well as offend others besides promoting negativity within the society. This perception is reinforced with the fact that the Malays hold high regards and respect towards older people as well as those of higher rank. Respect is highly valued and therefore, the Malays are more careful towards their superiors and seek to find ways to avoid causing shame or defeat in any confrontational situation. Through *Budi*, the practice of avoiding direct confrontations has resulted in the use of other mediums of communication such as folktales, songs and proverbs, whereby advices and criticism are masked with metaphors as well as decorative words (Lim, 2003a; Hassan Ahmad , 2003; Lim, 2010; Nor Hashimah , 2015; Nur Afiqah & Nor Hashimah, 2015; Suriati & Nor Hashimah, 2016; Julaina, Nor Hashimah, & Junaini, 2017). The act of backtracking or withdrawing from an argument is also considered honourable for the purpose of avoiding larger confrontations. Such norms of social conduct promote the usage of both the *akal* (intellect) and *hati* (heart) in which the intellect and feeling should be utilized in consideration of the other party.

In his discussion of *Budi*, Lim Kim Hui (2003b) has identified and charted out the networks of *Budi* into a Molecular form, which branches out into five other interrelated categories: *akal* (intellect), *bahasa/ pekerti* (referring to the moral behaviour or moral character and action), *hati* (heart), *bicara* (the well-mannered way of communicating) and *daya* (contribution to the practical aspect/ *budaya*) as shown in Figure 1.

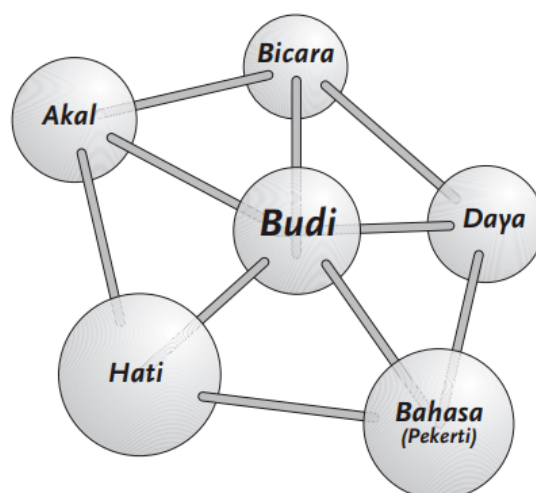


Figure 1: Lim Kim Hui's Molecurization of *Budi* (Lim, 2003b).

Each branch, like an atom in a molecular structure, remains an integral part of the motif of *Budi* and cannot be detached from its central core of the idea. Therefore, sometimes when the concept of *Budi* is discussed, some authors might refer to '*akal Budi*' or '*hati Budi*' as '*Budi*' instead, because they are also known as *Budi* or at least a part of the *Budi* complex. Consequently, a lot of studies on *Budi* focus on the perspectives of *akal Budi* and *hati Budi* because they are considered as being a larger part of *Budi* as the other interrelated elements such as *bicara* and *daya* are formed through the usage of the *akal* and *hati* (Aminudin Mansor, 2008). Eventually, the practice of *Budi* and its networks will lead a person to become a *Budiman* (a person of *Budi* or a wise person). *Budi* reflects the Malay cultural values at the highest state. A person of such status, who is called a *Budiman*, is expected to display all-rounded positive virtues. A *Budiman* should be able to use their intellect in a thoughtful way to consider the realities of reasons and at the same time be able to utilize the gentleness of their heart to convey positive messages to other people. In doing so, the person displaying good character and conduct will become an example to the others and contribute to the betterment of the society. However, in spite of all its positive connotations, *Budi* can also be consciously or unconsciously used in a negative way, which Lim has referred to as 'pure *Budi*'. His discussions include the results of practicing *Budi* in an extreme manner and without guidance which may lead a person simultaneously to overreact (*mengada-ngada*) and self-degrade (*menghina diri*) instead of displaying the expected humbleness. *Budi* can also be used consciously in a negative way when a person literally plays with *Budi* (*bermain akal (Budi)*). *Bermain Budi* means "*mengenakan tipu daya (tipu muslihat)*" (Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat, 2018) or translated as using the intellect to deceive. Therefore, in order to stay true to the values of *Budi*, it should be practiced in moderation, and this is also one of the elements of the Malay social values (Hashim Musa, Normahdiah, Rozita , & Siti Sarah, 2012). Both positive as well as negative perspectives of *Budi* will be

considered as I examine the major characters and their actions in my selected animated film *Putih* in the following section.

### **The Role of *Budi* as demonstrated by the Characters in *Putih***

The adaptation of the animated film *Putih* from the text *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah* has gone through some modifications in term of the title, the characters as well as events. However, the elements of values that are portrayed in the animated film are similar to the original text and have been designed to fit into a narrative style which is suitable for the current spectator (Tengku Intan Marlina, Hashim, Madiawati, & Nur Hamizah, 2014). The main character in the animated film is *Putih* and she is the daughter of the first wife, *Mak Labu*. *Mak Labu*'s husband, *Pak Sukam* married a second wife named *Mak Kundur* and together, they have a daughter, close to the age of *Putih*, who is named *Merah*. The animated film begins with an introduction to the living conditions of the characters after the death of *Putih*'s father. *Putih* and her mother are subjected to daily abuses and forced labour while *Mak Kundur* and *Merah* live a comfortable life in the same house. The animated film shows *Putih* and her mother as the practitioners of *Budi* whilst *Mak Kundur* and *Merah* possess oppositional characteristics. In the Malay worldview, *Budi* is related to the positive attributes of paddy (Lim, 2003a; Julaina, Nor Hashimah, & Junaini, 2017) which is associated with wisdom and humbleness and as the Malay proverb goes “*bawa resmi padi, semakin berisi semakin tunduk*” which means ‘follow the nature of paddy, the more it possesses the more it will bow’ (Lim, 2003a), whilst the binary opposite of paddy is *lalang* (weedy-grass) and is associated with negative attributes such as arrogance, pride and greed as demonstrated by the characters *Mak Kundur* and *Merah*. This metaphor is also re-enforced by the fact that *Mak Labu* is left with the paddy field while *Mak Kundur* is left with the house that they are living in (which they were supposed to be sharing) by their deceased husband.

Although *Mak Labu* is killed early in the animated film, she plays an important role in forbidding *Putih* to confront or talk about *Mak Kundur* or *Merah* behind their backs because the act of openly disagreeing with an older person is deemed unacceptable in the Malay society. In a scene after being harshly treated by *Mak Kundur*, *Putih* expresses her thoughts to her mother that *Mak Kundur* should not have treated them the way she does. The truth of her words is dismissed by her mother as *Putih* is told not to say anything negative in regards to her stepmother. In a way, *Mak Labu* is a supportive character who constantly reminds *Putih* to practice the characteristics of *hati Budi* and suppresses her negativity. In order to practice *Budi*, one has to be steadfast in his or her act of patience. This is because many others would display acts and speeches that are meant to be demeaning to a person. Fighting a person back with the same method of negativity would lead a person astray from the true path of *Budi* as he or she is required to confront such situations through a discrete manner. *Budi* highlights the positive thinking that one should possess, even when faced with a person of less desirable manner. One should never misjudge a person based on his or her appearance and should always be kind to others. As example of bearing attributes of a *wanita Budiman* (lady of *Budi*), both *Putih* and *Mak Labu* demonstrate the characteristics of being kind to not only people but even to animals. In one scene, *Mak Labu* is washing clothes next to the river when a fish surfaces (*kaloi* / gourami). *Mak Labu* manages to catch the fish for her family's meal but eventually sympathizes

with the fish and decides to let it go when she sees the fish's younglings. *Putih* also portrays kindness to animals in which she befriends a cat, *Gemo* and a rat, *Mikus*.

Lim (2003a) states that the Malays practice *Budi* with moderation in order to avoid undesirable outcomes due to 'pure *Budi*'. *Budi* that is practiced to its extremity might cause a person to build up his or her suppression to such an extent that might risk sudden emotional outbursts such as *amok*, *latah* (involuntary verbal expressions due to surprise) and even *rajuk* (sulking). *Putih* is portrayed as a person of *Budi* and tries her best not to display any sort of negativity. However, *Putih* is also portrayed as a person who is willing to directly reject instructions that are harmful to the wellbeing of herself and especially her mother. The scene which describes *Putih's* moderation in practicing *Budi* is when she defends the rights to her mother's paddy field. After the death of *Mak Labu* (from drowning after being pushed into the river by *Mak Kundur*), *Mak Kundur's* demeanour towards *Putih* changes drastically into gentleness. This is due to the conversation that *Mak Kundur* has heard between *Putih* and *Mak Labu* regarding their intention to move out. *Putih* manages to convince her mother that they could do well together away from *Mak Kundur* because they have the paddy field as a means to support themselves. When *Putih* is grieving for her mother, *Mak Kundur* suddenly becomes gentle and even permits her to refrain from doing any household chores. At the same time, *Mak Kundur* works discreetly on ways to ask *Putih* to surrender the paddy field to her. However, *Putih* is adamant about keeping the paddy field which immediately results in sustained daily abuse. Although such action produces an undesirable outcome, in another sense, *Putih* still has something valuable to hold on to and does not surrender it under any circumstances.

In the initial part of the animated film, *Putih* is portrayed as a person of kindness and patience, and also as a person who is a practitioner of *hati Budi*. In the latter part of the animated film, it is revealed that *Putih* is also intelligent as she demonstrates her *akal Budi* in a way that has led to the victory of the kingdom of *Tanjung Pura* against an enemy army after she married the prince, *Putera Aftus*. According to the original version of the folklore, the story would have ended after the marriage. The animated film, however, extends its narrative to include a war segment towards the end of the film in an attempt to highlight *Putih's* *akal Budi*. When *Putera Aftus's* father, *Raja Aristun Shah* is informed of the enemy army of *Raja Aria Bupala* that has crossed the border into *Tanjung Pura*, *Putera Aftus* is being appointed to lead their own army. In the next scene, *Putera Aftus* goes to his room to inform *Putih* about the incoming war that will commence the next day. *Putih* immediately says that she wants to follow but her husband dismisses her request out of fear for her safety. In an attempt to explain her reasons, she is patient and gentle in her persuasion and eventually the prince agrees with her reasoning. The next scene shows *Putih* making a request to her rat friend, *Mikus* to attack the enemy and their supplies. The attack by the rats causes a few enemy soldiers to fall ill however it is not enough to not stop the march of the enemy. *Putih* then suggests that the army should dig trenches as their first line of defence. The plan is successfully carried out and the prince's army wins the battle with minimum casualties. The animated film highlights *Putih's* wisdom through the prince's acknowledgement of his wife *Putih* being beautiful and clever.

In contrast to *Putih* and her mother, *Mak Kundur* and *Merah* have been portrayed as evil characters with various negative traits such as lazy, hot tempered and others. Despite that, their actions and demeanours paint them as a pair who understand the

cultural values of the Malays that are rooted in *Budi*. For instance, in a scene when *Merah* hears someone calling her chubby at the market area, she immediately attempts to harm the man and threatens to shove a stone into his mouth. Her mother stops her and pulls her away, saying that such action would bring shame to her as other people are looking at them. This shows the level of understanding of the Malay culture by these characters, especially by *Mak Kundur* because most of the evil schemes are planned by her. *Mak Kundur*, being the elder would naturally know the customs and traditions of the Malay people which is rooted in the notion of *Budi*. Although this seems to label her as a wise person, her actions and speeches with the intention to harm others paints her as a person of true evil. These characters feel the need to show good behaviour and speech in front of others due to the expectation of avoiding others' criticism or gossips. Hence they are painted as hypocrites whose actions and speeches are intended to 'save their faces' or to avoid humiliation. In addition, this understanding of the Malay culture also enables *Mak Kundur* and *Merah* to perform acts of *bermain Budi* (playing with *Budi*) or manipulating *Budi* in order to gain benefits. This is because in the Malay worldview, once a favour is given to a person, that particular person should try his or her best to repay the act of kindness. This kind of ideology contributes to the perception of expectation upon a given favour. Therefore in certain circumstances, people may show kindness towards others for a return of a bigger favour in which the other party could hardly refuse. For example, by treating *Putih* with kindness, *Mak Kundur* tries to persuade *Putih* to give up her paddy field.

In another scene, knowing that *Putih* is kind, *Mak Kundur* pretends to be sick and asks *Putih* to fetch medicine from another village so that they could catch the fish which *Putih* had called 'mother' and feed it to *Putih* in order to hurt her. Throughout the animated film, *Mak Kundur* and *Merah* continuously slander *Putih* so that *Merah* would stand out as the only daughter in the family who is bestowed with the positive virtues of *Budi*. All of their actions are meant to feed their selfish greed in order to live a comfortable, carefree life. They do not consider the result of their actions that befall their victims as evil, but as a stepping stone to fulfil their objectives. Despite having the upper hand of constantly torturing *Putih* physically, mentally and verbally, they are plagued by jealousy over every little comfort that *Putih* gains. They are even more jealous of the fact that it was *Putih* who gets married to the prince and not *Merah* even though *Putih* still treats them with care after her move to the palace. During a scene after the war and towards the end of the animated film, *Putih* is charged with having an illicit affair with *Sulong*, who is a military commander as well as a friend of the prince. This causes the king to banish both *Putih* and *Sulong* from the palace. Later, it is revealed that *Mak Kundur* and *Merah* are involved in scandalizing *Putih* and their conspiracy is discovered by *Datuk Bendahara* (vizier) who is the enemy spy. After being begged to keep the source of scandal as a secret, *Datuk Bendahara* agrees in exchange for a favour. Feeling indebted (*terhutang Budi*), both women agreed to his plan. At that time, the leader of the king's enemy, *Auwidicu* is already imprisoned after launching a war and failing to claim the throne. *Auwidicu* and *Datuk Bendahara* are affiliated to one another with the same ambition to conquer the country. By being imprisoned, *Datuk Bendahara* is worried that *Auwidicu* might reveal their affiliation which might jeopardize *Datuk Bendahara*'s position in the palace. Therefore, in order to permanently silence him, *Merah* is given the instruction to poison *Auwidicu*'s food, but when her attempt to poison is discovered, she blurts out the truth in self-defence. Drenched with panic and desperate to redeem himself,

*Datuk Bendahara* reveals that *Mak Kundur* and *Merah* have slandered *Putih* with the news of having an illicit affair with *Sulong*. As punishment for their crimes, *Raja Aristun* sentences them to work in the palace until their death. Following the scene, *Putera Aftus* is seen searching for *Putih* and the two of them are re-united.

## **Conclusion**

Eventually, the animated film and its primary protagonist, *Putih* encounters a happy ending by being steadfast to her practice of *Budi*. *Putih* remains a character consistently displaying good conduct and behaviour through the usage of her *hati Budi* and *akal Budi*. Such characteristics paint her as a *wanita Budiman* (lady of *Budi*), presenting all-rounded virtues bringing people, including the spectator into the folds of appreciation. The spectator, especially a local, who is deeply influenced by the Malay culture which is imbued with the values of *Budi*, gradually warms up to the main protagonist, *Putih* through its contrast representation of the moral values of *Budi*. This unconscious acceptance of *Putih* is due to the spectator's value judgement that is based on *Budi*, shaped by both its negative and positive elements. The spectator would acknowledge the portrayal of *Putih* as a character who withstands all kinds of abuses inflicted upon her for the ultimate purpose of achieving a harmonious outcome. Therefore, the perception of the idea of *Budi* can also shape the spectator's engagement with the characters and influence their judgement of the characters' actions as well as their utterances. Hence, I contend that the concept of *Budi*, in all its aspects, is extremely significant in considering the Malay world-view as it not only determines its cultural expressions such as the animated film, *Putih* but also influences the reaction and the reception of the spectator as well.



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