

Hegemony and Symbolic Resistance in Malaysia: A Study of Namewee's Music

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ABSTRACT

Wee Meng Chee, better known as *Namewee*, is a controversial Malaysian rapper whose music has courted trouble with the Malaysian government. Although some people dismiss his songs as profane, this paper will highlight that *Namewee's* music actually constitutes a critique of Malaysia's social realities, and it challenges the BN ruling coalition's political discourses, particularly UMNO's ideology of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay hegemony). One recurring theme in *Namewee's* songs is his frustration with policies that discriminate against Chinese Malaysians. To understand the significance of *Namewee's* music, this paper refers to previous scholarly efforts in analysing the ways subordinate groups respond to domination and explores the potentials of rap music as a form of symbolic resistance against the dominant political discourse in Malaysia. *Namewee's* works also stand out considering 'protest songs' are a rare genre in Malaysia.

Keywords: Chinese Malaysians, *Ketuanan Melayu*, *Namewee*, rap, symbolic resistance

1. INTRODUCTION

Some scholars argue that rap/hip hop is not just a form of popular music but a social movement that harnesses the energy of African American youths, who have long considered themselves as a marginalised group in the US (Henderson, 1996; Ogbur, 1999; Watkins, 1998). Many rap/hip hop artistes have highlighted social inequalities and its associated problems in the American society which primarily affect black African Americans due to their subordinate position compared to the dominant white European Americans.

Originating from the South Bronx in New York City in the 1970s, rap/hip hop was created by black youths who grew up in a hostile environment characterised by alienation, poverty and urban ruins. According to Rose (1997), rap music is an outgrowth of these social and political conditions. Since crime, drugs, unemployment and unyielding frustration are elemental to the lives of many African Americans, they are often reflected in the content of rap music. The tension between rap's "confining rhythmic patterns and its aggressive presentation" potentially assaults the White middle class listeners, who are part of the dominant class (Rose, 1997: 208-209).

However, Rose (1991: 276) also points out that rap music has not always been political. Starting off as an apolitical 'party music' with limited social relevance, rap only became a

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