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Social Criticism in the Film “*Pendatang*” (2023)

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Abstract

This study examines *Pendatang* (2023), a Malaysian dystopian film that foregrounds racial tension within a multicultural society. Using a qualitative methodology, the research identifies social criticism of racism and analyses visual representations of ethnic segregation through close textual–visual observation and secondary data analysis. Guided by social criticism theory, the study demonstrates how dialogue, mise-en-scène, and institutional imagery normalise exclusion while simultaneously critiquing systemic inequality. The findings reveal that racism is articulated through everyday language and moral justification, while segregation is embedded in spatial, legal, and social structures, positioning the film as a critique of contemporary Malaysian racial politics.

Keywords: Social Criticism, film, *Pendatang*

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1.0 Introduction

Cinema often serves as a mirror to society, reflecting and critiquing social, cultural, and political norms. In Malaysia, where race relations are a complex and sensitive matter, film holds the potential to challenge dominant ideologies and ignite meaningful conversations. *Pendatang* (2023), directed by Ng Ken Kin, is one such work. As Malaysia's first crowdfunded dystopian short film, *Pendatang* boldly critiques two enduring social issues: systemic racism and ethnic segregation. Set in a future governed by a Segregation Act, the narrative follows the Wong family as they move into a Malay-majority neighborhood and become entangled in state-enforced racial boundaries. The film's central conflict protecting a hidden Malay child from discovery becomes a powerful metaphor for cross-ethnic solidarity in the face of institutionalized discrimination (Kalash, 2022).

The urgency of these themes is rooted in real-world concerns. The KOMAS (2023) Racism Report identifies enduring racial disparities across Malaysia's education, housing, healthcare, and employment systems. Raman and Sua (2023) further argue that vernacular education inadvertently fosters separation, while Ahmad et al. (2024) highlight how ethnic zoning in schools threatens national unity. The film's release on YouTube, following its rejection by the Malaysian Film Censorship Board (LPF), signals the political weight of its message (The Star, 2023; Aida Nadhirah, 2023). Amir Muhammad, the film's producer, asserts that *Pendatang* is intended to provoke public reflection on race and belonging (Minderjeet Kaur, 2023).

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This study sets out two primary objectives. First, it identifies how racism is represented in the film, particularly through language, dialogue, and verbal cues that expose internalized bias and institutionalized discrimination. The portrayal of racism in *Pendatang* is both explicit and subtle, manifesting in everyday conversations, legal enforcement, and social taboos. Second, the study analyses the representation of ethnic segregation through the film's visual language *mise-en-scène*, space, costume, and architecture which delineate zones of privilege and exclusion. These cinematic elements function as metaphors for Malaysia's socio-political boundaries, encouraging viewers to reflect on the consequences of state-sanctioned division. Visual representation refers to how meaning is constructed and communicated through images, settings, colors, symbols, and spatial arrangements within the frame. These visual elements work together to evoke emotions, emphasize inequality, and highlight contrasts between groups. In *Pendatang*, visual tools are central to building a dystopian reality that mirrors Malaysia's socio-political anxieties.

Textual analysis, in contrast, involves examining spoken dialogue, character expression, internal monologues, and thematic language used in the film. This form of analysis allows the researcher to interpret how language contributes to social critique, how it reflects ideological positions, and how it reveals the character's internalization of societal values. When combined with visual analysis, textual analysis offers a holistic interpretation of the film's critique. This research is important as it positions *Pendatang* not just as entertainment but as a mirror of Malaysian society. It encourages deeper reflection on how policies, practices, and perceptions surrounding race continue to shape national identity, interaction, and injustice. By combining visual and textual analysis, this study frames *Pendatang* not merely as a cultural product but as a critical artifact. It investigates how film can interrogate systemic power, expose marginalization, and foster national dialogue. In doing so, it argues that *Pendatang* contributes meaningfully to Malaysian socio-political discourse by offering a dystopian vision that resonates with contemporary anxieties.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Social Criticism and Cinematic Expression

Social criticism functions as a framework for analyzing how power, inequality, and exclusion operate within cultural texts. Abdul Halim Ali et al. (2025) assert that literature and film play vital roles in exposing societal injustices, especially those affecting marginalized communities. Through representation, the media can both critique the status quo and advocate reform. Habermas's (2023) theory of communicative rationality underscores this function by positing that open discourse enabled through cultural mediums—can facilitate social change. In cinema, this is enacted through narrative, image, and sound, which create spaces for collective reflection (Sari et al., 2023).

2.2 Racism in Malaysian Society

Racism in Malaysia is deeply institutionalized. Pusat KOMAS (2023) identifies systematic discrimination against non-Bumiputera citizens, particularly in education, economic opportunity, and public services. Raman and Sua (2023) note how education systems sustain racial divides through vernacular schooling, while Ahmad et al. (2024) point to how policy-based enrolment reinforces ethnic homogeneity. Dr. Azly Rahman (2023) critiques the ideological underpinnings of such policies, arguing they reflect the remnants of colonial governance structures that persist under new labels. In this context, *Pendatang* does not simply portray racism as interpersonal conflict; it reveals how state policies, community attitudes, and generational norms reinforce hierarchies of privilege and exclusion.

2.3 Ethnic Segregation and Its Visual Culture

Ethnic segregation encompasses both spatial and symbolic division. Yaakub et al. (2024) describe how urban zoning and settlement patterns in Peninsular Malaysia sustains *de facto* racial separation. Ahmad et al. (2024) expand this analysis to the education sector, noting how ethnic clustering within schools leads to isolation and intergroup suspicion. Asrita et al. (2023) explain that visual storytelling, especially in film, helps audiences interpret the lived experience of such separation. *Pendatang* exemplifies this through its careful use of *mise-en-scène*: colour-coded borders, surveillance mechanisms, and restricted zones are deployed as visual metaphors for institutional exclusion. These elements invite viewers to confront the aesthetics of division and their real-world parallels.

2.4 Film as Social Discourse

The Film functions not only as entertainment but also as social discourse. According to Muhammed and Rahman (2024), cinema plays a pedagogical role in shaping public consciousness, particularly when it resists dominant narratives. Eksentrika (2023) praises *Pendatang* for its daring treatment of taboo issues, despite noting some narrative limitations. Cineverse (Tasya Syafitri, 2024) similarly recognizes the film's cultural impact, even as it critiques its pacing. The Malaysian Insight (2024) argues that the film's emotional resonance derives from its capacity to mirror both historical trauma and current anxieties. As such, *Pendatang* operates as both a narrative and a cultural intervention resisting censorship (Theevya Ragu, 2023), engaging audiences online (Mat Don, 2023), and influencing public discourse (Aida Nadhirah, 2023).

3.0 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, which is appropriate for examining cultural texts and socially embedded meanings in film. Qualitative inquiry emphasizes interpretive understanding, meaning-making, and contextual analysis, particularly when

exploring social phenomena represented through media texts (Creswell, 2024). The research analyses *Pendatang* (2023) using two interrelated methods: textual–visual observation and secondary data analysis.

The observation method involved repeated and systematic viewings of the film to examine both its visual and textual components. Key scenes were identified, timestamped, and categorized according to their relevance to the study's two research objectives: representations of racism and representations of ethnic segregation. Analytical attention was directed towards elements of mise-en-scene, including setting, costume, lighting, colour, and spatial arrangement, as well as cinematographic choices such as camera angles and composition. Auditory elements, particularly dialogue tone and background sound, were also examined. Visual elements were analyzed to identify symbolic exclusion and spatial power relations, while dialogue was scrutinized for expressions of bias, fear, and racial ideology.

Secondary data analysis complemented the observational process by situating the film within its broader socio-political and cultural context. This involved examining critical responses, opinion pieces, and media commentaries related to *Pendatang* (2023). Sources included news and cultural platforms such as *BenarNews* (Minderjeet Kaur, 2023), *Malaysiakini* (Theevya Ragu, 2023), and *The Vibes* (Kalash, 2022). Public audience responses from YouTube (Mat Don, 2023) and TikTok were also reviewed to provide insight into audience reception and public discourse surrounding the film.

The analysis was guided by the theory of social criticism (Abdul Halim Ali et al., 2025), which provides a framework for examining how cultural texts critique dominant ideologies and expose structures of inequality. Within this framework, visual representation was treated not merely as an aesthetic construct but as an ideological mechanism, while textual analysis focused on how language functions to normalise or resist prejudice. The integration of visual and textual analysis enables a comprehensive understanding of *Pendatang* as both a cinematic narrative and a critical commentary on racial politics in Malaysia.

4.0 Findings

The findings are organized according to the two research objectives, each addressing a distinct dimension of social criticism represented in *Pendatang* (2023). The analysis reveals that the film constructs social criticism through both **textual mechanisms** (dialogue, verbal threats, and interpersonal exchanges) and **visual mechanisms** (spatial division, institutional imagery, and symbolic segregation). Together, these elements expose how racism and ethnic segregation are normalized, institutionalized, and reproduced within the film's dystopian narrative.

For the first objective, the findings focus on how racism is articulated through character dialogue and verbal interaction. These textual expressions include commands, warnings, insults, and emotional reactions that emerge when characters encounter individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. The analysis demonstrates that language in *Pendatang* frequently operates as a mechanism of fear, control, and exclusion, often framed as moral obligation or legal compliance. Racist expressions are not presented as isolated personal attitudes but as reflections of systemic conditioning, where obedience to racial hierarchy is portrayed as necessary for survival.

The second objective examines how ethnic segregation is visually constructed through spatial organization, institutional practices, and everyday routines. Visual elements such as checkpoints, zoning systems, school materials, housing arrangements, and surveillance devices illustrate how racial separation is embedded not only in law but also in daily life. These visual representations reinforce segregation as a "normal" social order, shaping access to mobility, safety, healthcare, and basic resources. Collectively, the findings indicate that *Pendatang* critiques racial inequality by revealing how discrimination is sustained through both visible structures and invisible social compliance.

4.1 Objective 1: Social Criticism from the Perspective of Racism in *Pendatang* (2023)

The findings related to racism reveal that *Pendatang* employs dialogue and verbal interaction to illustrate how racial prejudice is internalised and enforced through everyday communication. Table 1 summarizes key scenes in which racism is expressed explicitly through commands, threats, and verbal hostility. **Table 1** demonstrates that early dialogue, such as public announcements instructing citizens to "report outsiders immediately" (0:11), establishes a climate of systemic distrust and racial surveillance. Authority figures repeatedly justify racial control through legal discourse, framing obedience as necessary to prevent chaos (2:54). This narrative strategy normalizes racism by embedding it within law and governance rather than presenting it as individual malice.

Several scenes show racism functioning as a mechanism of punishment and deterrence. Threats such as being sent to an "Indian zone" (16:00) or warnings against helping "their kind" (25:27) portray racial assistance as a punishable offense. These moments demonstrate how fear is used to discourage empathy and reinforce racial boundaries. Interpersonal interactions further reveal emotional distancing, as seen when characters are instructed not to eat together or even acknowledge one another by name (27:45), reflecting the dehumanization of racial "others." Racism is also depicted as a value upheld within family and community structures. Statements rejecting family members who cross racial boundaries (42:16) illustrate how racial ideology overrides kinship and personal relationships. The escalation of racist rhetoric culminates in explicit verbal violence (1:28:53), indicating how prolonged systemic prejudice eventually manifests as open hatred. The final revelation of the Malay child's name (1:32:39) symbolises a brief restoration of identity, suggesting resistance against racial silencing within an otherwise oppressive system. Overall, the findings show that racism in *Pendatang* is communicated through language that legitimises exclusion, prioritises racial loyalty, and conditions individuals to accept discrimination as moral and lawful behaviour.

Table 1: timecode for visual/textual description and interpretation

Timecode	Visual / Textual Description	Interpretation (Social Criticism)
0:11	Loudspeaker: "Report outsiders immediately."	Promotes systemic distrust and policing of racial minorities.
2:54	Officer: "Everyone must follow the law, or the country will fall into chaos."	Justifies racial control through legal obedience.
16:00	A guard threatens a character: "We'll send you to the Indian zone."	Reflects ethnic areas being used as punishment, reinforcing segregation and undesirability of 'other' zones.
25:27	"This is what happens when you help their kind."	The Message that helps Malays = consequence
27:45	Seng instructs, "Don't eat with him. Don't ask his name."	A clear example of racial dehumanization and emotional distancing under social rules.
35:12	Bus station entry points are separated according to citizenship status.	Embeds systemic segregation into public transportation infrastructure.
36:44	Seng says, "I don't want to be arrested because of him."	Self-preservation justifies complicity. Racial loyalty trumps justice or empathy.
42:16	Aunt Koo proclaims: "He's no longer my son — he married a Malay."	Reflects generational racism that breaks familial bonds to uphold racial purity.
43:13	Minority families were isolated and given separate, lower-quality food during distributions.	Exposes humanitarian discrimination where basic needs become racially stratified.
1:01:00	"Our race comes first!" shouted Ho during a meeting.	Mobilizes racism as a form of civic duty and loyalty.
1:28:53	Ho screams: "You and your people can go to hell!"	Climactic racial hatred — racism reaches full verbal violence.
1:32:39	The Malay girl's name, "Raifa," is finally spoken aloud.	Represents the restoration of identity after being silenced by racism.

(Source: *Pendatang 2023*)

4.2 Objective 2: Social Criticism from the Perspective of Ethnic Segregation in *Pendatang* (2023)

Findings related to ethnic segregation indicate that the film relies heavily on visual storytelling to demonstrate how racial separation is institutionalized and sustained. As shown in Table 2, segregation is embedded within both public infrastructure and private life, reinforcing ethnic boundaries as an unavoidable social reality. Early scenes depict extreme behaviors driven by segregation ideology, such as citizens destroying resources rather than sharing them across ethnic lines (3:07). These visuals communicate how racial purity is prioritized over human cooperation, even in situations of scarcity. Access to essential services, particularly healthcare, is shown to be dependent on ethnic classification and geographic location (4:39), highlighting how segregation transforms basic human rights into conditional privileges.

Table 2: timecode for visual/textual description and interpretation

Timecode	Visual / Textual Description	Interpretation (Social Criticism)
3:07	Ethnic citizens would rather burn furniture than share it with Malays.	Extreme ethnic division prioritizes purity over resource sharing, even in scarcity.
4:39	A family is denied medical emergency access due to their location and ethnicity.	Survival is racialized. Basic human rights like healthcare are dependent on ethnicity and geographic classification.
6:10	Security guards conduct harsh inspections targeting certain groups based on appearance.	Racism is normalized through visual profiling disguised as "security." It legitimizes discrimination via institutional authority.
8:35	Children are taught racial laws in school that promote social distance.	Early indoctrination of segregation ideology ensures generational continuation.
8:47	"They have different values." - Teacher	Cultural segregation is taught as an inherent difference.
16:04	"She should've stayed in her place."	Cultural control is enforced even in public commercial spaces.
25:27	"We warned you not to protect them." - by Guard during the arrest.	Warnings act as tools of compliance to uphold segregation.
30:08	"We'll report them if they're still here by morning."	Social responsibility is framed as ethnic gatekeeping.
44:05	Bobby reveals that the medicine was hidden in the rice pot to keep it safe.	Illustrates how minorities must conceal access to critical resources out of fear of confiscation, symbolizing the severity of enforced segregation
1:17:55	"You know the rules. No mixing."	Mixing of ethnicities is prohibited by law.
1:26:13	"Make sure there's an officer at every checkpoint."	Full mobilization for ethnic enforcement.

(Source: *Pendatang 2023*)

Institutional enforcement is repeatedly visualized through security inspections, checkpoints, and surveillance practices (6:10; 1:26:13). These scenes normalize racial profiling under the guise of "security," legitimizing discrimination through authority. Educational settings further reinforce segregation, as children are taught racial laws that frame separation as natural and necessary (8:35), ensuring ideological continuity across generations. Everyday dialogue and public behavior also contribute to maintaining segregation. Statements

such as “no mixing” (1:17:55) and threats of reporting minorities (30:08) demonstrate how ordinary citizens participate in enforcing ethnic boundaries. Visual symbols, including concealed medicine and restricted movement (44:05), reveal how minorities must hide resources to survive, underscoring the severity of systemic exclusion. Collectively, these findings show that ethnic segregation in *Pendatang* is not merely a background setting but a central mechanism through which racial inequality is reproduced. The film critiques segregation by exposing how it is visually normalized, socially enforced, and accepted as part of everyday life.

5.0 Discussion

This study demonstrates that *Pendatang* (2023) functions as a cinematic form of social criticism by exposing how racism and ethnic segregation are normalized through both language and visual systems. Drawing directly from the findings, the discussion highlights how textual expressions of racism (Table 1) and visual constructions of segregation (Table 2) operate together to sustain a dystopian social order that closely mirrors contemporary racial anxieties in Malaysia.

The findings related to racism reveal that dialogue in *Pendatang* is not merely a narrative device but a mechanism of ideological enforcement. Commands, warnings, and verbal threats—such as calls to report “outsiders” or statements prioritising racial loyalty—position racism as a moral and legal obligation rather than an individual prejudice. As shown in Table 1, characters frequently articulate fear of punishment for crossing racial boundaries, indicating how racism is internalized through survival-based reasoning. These verbal exchanges demonstrate that prejudice is sustained through everyday language, where empathy is framed as betrayal and obedience to racial hierarchy is equated with civic responsibility.

At the same time, the visual findings illustrate that ethnic segregation is embedded within institutional and spatial arrangements. Table 2 shows how segregation is normalised through checkpoints, restricted zones, educational practices, and unequal access to healthcare and resources. These visual structures reinforce the idea that separation is natural, lawful, and necessary for social order. Importantly, segregation is not enforced solely by authorities; it is reproduced through the actions of ordinary citizens who monitor, report, and exclude others. This reflects how systemic discrimination relies on public compliance as much as institutional power.

When considered together, the textual and visual findings reveal that racism and segregation in *Pendatang* are mutually reinforcing. Racist language legitimizes segregation, while segregated spaces intensify fear, mistrust, and hostility. The film’s dystopian setting amplifies these mechanisms, allowing viewers to recognise familiar patterns of exclusion within an exaggerated but recognizable social framework. In doing so, *Pendatang* critiques not only overt racial violence but also the everyday practices, silences, and compliances that allow inequality to persist. The discussion thus confirms that the film operates as both a narrative text and a critical intervention into Malaysia’s racial discourse.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that *Pendatang* (2023) effectively employs cinematic strategies to critique systemic racism and institutionalised ethnic segregation within a Malaysian context. Through a combination of explicit dialogue and symbolic visual representation, the film exposes how racial prejudice is normalised, justified, and sustained through law, social conditioning, and everyday interaction. Racism is articulated through language that prioritises obedience and racial loyalty, while segregation is visually reinforced through spatial division, surveillance, and restricted access to essential services.

The findings demonstrate that discrimination in *Pendatang* is not presented as the result of individual hostility alone, but as a product of broader structural forces that shape behaviour, belief, and social order. By portraying racism and segregation as embedded within ordinary routines and institutions, the film challenges viewers to reflect on the subtle ways inequality is reproduced and accepted in society. As such, *Pendatang* contributes meaningfully to Malaysian socio-political discourse by using dystopian cinema as a reflective tool to question contemporary racial realities.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that Malaysian filmmakers continue to engage with socially critical themes, particularly those addressing race, identity, and power, using film as a platform for public dialogue and reflection. Educators and scholars are encouraged to incorporate films such as *Pendatang* into higher education curricula, especially within film studies, cultural studies, and social sciences, to promote critical thinking and empathy. Future research may extend this study by examining audience reception across different ethnic groups or by conducting comparative analyses with other Southeast Asian films that address similar social issues. Such studies would further enrich understanding of cinema’s role in shaping and challenging social consciousness.

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