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12MP: The Sophia factor

MY VIEW -
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IN my youth, Sophia Loren was famous. The Italian movie star was admired not only for her beauty but also as an accomplished actress that took your breath away. The film, *Two Women*, was a defining moment for many. It won her the coveted Best Actress Oscar that speaks for itself. “Beauty is how you feel inside, and it reflects in your eyes. It is not something physical”, she was quoted as saying. Unfortunately, she had not stepped foot in Malaysia to experience our beauty.

While many of the younger generation (even older ones, I suspect) may not have the slightest clue who Sophia Loren was, they were introduced to her namesake last week. However, “she” (or “It”) is no movie talent (in fact, no innate talent at all unlike her human counterpart); nor does it come any closer to the beauty that the mesmerising star was referring to. To be sure, “it” is hardly “human” although its gestures and facial responses were said to be “real”. The live debut in the capital city was a mere “token” in an IT summit, many still have no clue what “it” was all about. For example, why the single name “Sophia” without a surname or a family name? For this purpose, let us use “Zero” to denote that “it” has no human ancestral belonging and is thus a non-human. Make no mistake! Sophia Zero is alien. Unlike Sophia Loren, Zero cannot “feel inside” what can be reflected in the eyes no matter how “real” they appear.

To add to the confusion, Zero was dressed like a “she” given the Malaysian kebaya which is, wildly (if not deceptively) suggesting that “it” is a “female”, or perhaps a “transgender”. If “she” is really the former, then should “she” not be wearing a hijab too? Or at least a selendang to go with the kebaya? This is a point to belabour because allegedly Zero is a “citizen” of a country noted for its highly conservative viewpoint especially towards women where the “head-cover” is mandatory. Otherwise, one can land into trouble with the moral police. Given the contrary it raised a number of issues to define what Zero is ultimately. Or can it be an early warning of a change beyond the paradigm of established norms or values such that when it comes to anything technological human values take a back seat, if at all.

At the 2019 World Economic Forum, the founder-organiser had admitted that the battle between the robots and humans has started. And humans will probably lose. Is this one of them? In other words, this could be the ultimate challenge for the future where the disruptions and distortions are not merely technical and external in nature. Instead it is also societal upheaval of unequal proportion playing havoc on fundamental social norms, values and indeed the very civilisation itself banking on machines and artificial intelligence (AI) to take control. And by implication as

stated by the late Stephen Hawking – the eventual demise of the human species, if not reduced to “idiots”, according to Einstein. In summary, everything can now be redefined which until now is strictly under the purview of the “natural (human) intelligence” (NI) that is imbued with human spirituality. The analogy goes like this: If humans write algorithms to give rise to an “altered entity” (other than “human being”), likewise “humans” are rendered so when Providence infused “soul” onto them. This stark difference is a point of departure between the two narratives which have never been articulated at all in the discourse on AI. To paraphrase Sophia Loren, it is void inside.

Read this with another quote from her: “I have my own peculiar yardstick for measuring a man: Does he have the courage to cry in a moment of grief? Does he have the compassion not to hunt an animal? In his relationship with a woman, is he gentle? Real manliness is nurtured in kindness and gentleness, which I associate with intelligence, comprehension, tolerance, justice, education, and high morality.”

Such profound and deep rendering of what a (hu)man is all about cannot be expected of Zero despite the claims being humanlike, that is, sans the soul. It is therefore imperative to be mindful when it comes to considering the “Sophia” factor in the delivery of 12MP without compromising the very “soul” of the beloved nation. Let us be mindful.