

**Conference Report/Laporan Persidangan**

**The International Symposium on Malaysian Masculinities  
Co-organised by CMS-ATMA, UKM (3 & 4 Nov 2001)**

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The Centre for Malaysian Studies (CMS), Monash Asia Institute at the Monash University and the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation (ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) have recently co-organised the International Symposium on Malaysian Masculinities. It was held on the UKM main campus in Bangi for two days, on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> November, 2001. The symposium was the first of its kind in Malaysia. Naturally, it attracted prominent scholars, academicians, journalists, government officials and individuals from neighbouring countries as well as Sri Lanka, Japan, Europe and Australia. The organisers showed great pleasure in the presence of Dato' Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, the Minister of the newly formed Ministry of Women and Family Development in Malaysia. Dato' Shahrizat had officially launched the symposium.

The symposium's primary aim was to 'promote research and publishing in this unexplored yet fertile area (of masculinity) of the Malaysian social sciences by drawing together Malaysian and international scholars from a range of disciplines'. With this, the organisers hoped to deepen the understanding of feminist ideas through an examination of both male and female gender roles. Two very prominent professors were invited to the symposium: Professor Ashis Nandy from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi presented a keynote address, and Professor Thomas Hylland Eriksen from the Centre for Technology, Innovation and Culture, University of Oslo, Norway delivered an inaugural lecture at the symposium.

Considerable research, studies, discourses and debates have been made about gender, sex, feminism and/or women issues. They are founded on either the more dominant paradigms of essentialist or constructionist about gender and sex; gender inequality, liberalism and radical feminist studies in feminism; and various empirical and theoretical perspectives about women's experiences throughout the world. It is not difficult to trace in these discourses that masculinity is the more dominant sex identity, and men are the core of reference for gender inequalities and women's subjugated, secondary or subordinated status. However, little was said about masculinity. The theme for this symposium was most appropriate to unveil this 'obscure' yet unduly referred sex (or masculine) role, with a particular focus on Malaysia.

Gender is a social construct, so are its ascribed roles. Sex identity denotes male and female (masculine and feminine identities). The performance of gender and social roles, and the conformation of social values, rules and norms are relative to culture. Therefore, cultural determination of male and female roles or the appreciation of masculine and feminine qualities differs from one culture to the other, and from certain period of time to another. However, hegemonic discourses of gender/sex have generally delineated the binary system of gender/sex.

The institutionalisation of this binary system leave little possibility for the negotiation of gender, sex and sexuality outside the system itself. In fact, an ambiguous presentation or attempt to cross the 'line' between the gender/sex dichotomy may result in disaster, such as the assassination of Gandhi (appears in Prof. Ashis Nandy's keynote address). In his paper, he claims that the expectation of a masculine figure to uphold justice in India was not lived up to by Gandhi. The allegedly transcendence of sex roles (of a masculine protector to feminine 'soft' strategies—silence, starvation, etc.) was not accepted, hence the termination of his role and life in the hands of one man.

The division of public and private spheres emerged in the discussion of sexuality and sexual interactions. The first panel of the symposium showed that the well-known Anwar Ibrahim's case has opened up not only a whole range of discussion in terms of politics; it prompted the previously domesticated subject of sexuality into the public. Such discussions highlighted the correlation between power and sexual (mis-) conducts in Malaysian social and political realms. Prof Shamsul A. B. and Neil Khor Jin Keong depicted Anwar's case to illuminate the forceful authority of the internet and journalism. The interplay of politics and sex(ual) identity professed by two most conspicuous political leaders of the country (the Prime Minister and former Deputy Prime Minister), reflected the projection of the patriarch role of a father (the Prime Minister) in political arena (bapakism, power struggle (and abuse) and money politics), and the concealed (deviant) homosexual orientation of a supposedly religious public image/figure and a family man (i.e Anwar Ibrahim). These contradictory representations of masculine characteristics have in one sense, unfolded the antagonistic positions of two prominent political figures in the nation; in another, proven the dismissal of the one who does not conform to the binary system.

However, the domesticated subject of sexuality is now brought into the public sphere. Legal procedures, trials, journalistic reports, public demonstration, and open discussion on newspapers have all emphasised the discovery of what was formerly stamped as 'taboo' and shameful. In fact, the internet provides a viable space and potent tool for public interactions/condemn, not least to unveil the 'juicy' or sensational sexual side of Anwar's case. Hence, the so-called post-Anwar era flashes a 'new' (or public) discovery of sexuality and masculinity in the Malay(sian) society.

Suffice to say, identifications of masculinity and femininity traits or characteristic are not ahistorical. Malaysia's past political economic and social developments as well as literature studies are efficiently framed in the papers done by Maila Stiven, Hazidi b. Haji Abdul Hamid and Raihanah Mohd. Mydin, and Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Norfaridah Abdul Manaf.

Maila pointed out that the construction of masculine identity of Malay(an) men in time of colonialism was largely based on the myth of a 'lazy native'. While colonial administration was highly masculine, women were excluded from the construction. Following this, the so-called modernised Malaysian State particularly in the 'Mahathir era' has systematically formulated masculine images of the nation. Admist the advent of globalisation, the State has elevated the 'traditional' and modern 'eastern' values to enhance the (patriarchal) role of the State and men. Maila, aware of the issue of ethnicity, culture, locality (Rembau in particular) and social class, has shown the diversity and perhaps, contradicting viewpoints of men's (hypermasculine) public images and women's perception of masculinity in the country.

Maila has also clearly noted the dissolving public and private divides in terms of Anwar's case, and the role of breadwinners. The shovelling into the domestic, namely sexual orientation and activities, and then bringing it into the public is not a new phenomenon. This is traceable in Malay literature and history documented in *Sejarah Melayu* and *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, and the era of Melaka sultanate. Ruzy and Norfaridah attempt to delineate in these documentations that, the presentation of the penis, whether in conjugal relationships, religion and politics, was viable in (hyper) masculine images and political authority. In this, homosexuality was not alienated in that era. The potency of the phallus is also represented by the Twin Towers of Petronas which, the authors asserted, "symbolise technological progress and affluence". Further to this, the transformation or rather continuity of male sexuality (signifier of pleasure, power and affluence) and the potency of the phallus from *Sejarah Melayu* to the present day, have exempted women's role.

The Malay masculine representation brought up by Hazidi and Raihanah's paper is founded on the language (phrases and words) used in Malay literature. The synonym for manliness denominated by *jantan* and *lelaki* signifies a complex illustration of being a (Malay) man, i.e. his behaviours, code of conduct, sex, etc. On a more recent work, Hazidi and Raihanah selected other Malay words; for example, *kasar* and *lembut*; and characteristics such as passion and reason to reflect on the "values and notions in the culture and language that cut across the gender divide to apply to both genders, differing only in degrees" (paper presenters' conclusion). This has again proven that masculinity is not rigid nor a singular term. The gender dichotomy is not necessary drawn out in all cultures or times.

Parallel with the spirits of the symposium's main aim, that is to address masculinity in plurality, all the papers have delineated versions of masculine

roles and identities. In brief, masculinities are related to nation building, culture, ethnicity, politics, corporate world, geographical boundaries and the different intersections of gender, sex and sexuality. In other words, there are Chinese masculinity, Malay masculinity; corporate masculinity; migrant's masculinity, urban masculinity, so on and so forth. A few versions/papers are especially worth to mention, for example the inaugural lecture of the ATMA-CMS Public Lecture Series in Malaysian Studies made by Professor Thomas Eriksen, 'The Sexual Life of Nations'; Michelle Lee's paper on male transgenderists in Malaysia; and 'Masculinity and Sikhism' by Sarjit S. Gill. Michelle's and Sarjit's papers reveal insights into two minority communities in the country.

Professor Eriksen asserted in his lecture that the nation can be personalised and cross-examined with gender. In this case, metaphors are utilised and understood as relevant to nation, national sentiments and the relations between the nation and individuals. For example, terms such as 'a young nation', 'developing nations', or 'matured nation' or 'motherland'. The head of state/nation is seen as a father who demands obedience from his sons (patriotism, nationalism) and to be fraternal to other fellow citizens. During war-time, the 'father' and 'brothers' are supposed to protect women and children. In other words, a nation is built on the family—father, mother (eg. mother tongue), sons, brothers, daughters (to be protected), etc. In addition, the nation signifies sexual identities of men and women; that of a father or leader, brotherhood, mother and weak daughters to be protected.

While Professor Eriksen has succinctly described the symbolic relations between men as leaders and warriors, and women as subordinates and weak (metaphorically as the land, and subject to protection); no mention was made about minority groups, particularly of transgenderists as a minority (gender) group. Transgenderism and transsexualism have received much attention recently due to Anwar Ibrahim's trials and a more general anticipation/disclosure of homosexuality in the country. Public negative opinion about transgenderism is basically due to the lack of understanding of the phenomenon and of transgenderists, or in the Malay term, *Mak Nyah*. The paper, "Ungendering Gendered Identities? Transgenderism in Malaysia" presented by Michelle W. Y. Lee presents the spectrum of transgender to illustrate the complexity of transgenderism. It also discusses the limitation of the term *Mak Nyah* which includes different groups of transgenderists in Malaysia.

Sarjit's paper illuminates the largely neglected minority Sikh community in Malaysia. It is interesting to find that even though as a religion, Sikhism is highly egalitarian in terms of gender roles and relations; however, in practice, the community is in fact highly patriarchal. Although there is an effort to preserve its tradition and religion, the Sikh (male) community seems to have maintained a political milieu which sustain men's superior (and women's subordinate) status and authority, especially in the management of *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples) and traditional ceremonies. This reflects the paradox of sustaining traditional and

religious doctrines that advocate gender equality, and the practice of masculine ideology and identity within the Sikh community.

The indication of boundary-crossing is not uncommon as shown in these 3 papers: nation building (sex/gender roles and politics—private and public), ambiguity of gender (gender/sex crossing) and social values (Sikh religion and practice). The diversity of masculinity has in fact transformed or transcended a variety of boundaries. Apart from religion and culture, it transcends class, ethnicity, generation, history, and geographical borders.

In relation to geographical boundaries, Ray Gibbin and Penny Graham study male transmigrants in connection with masculinity. Ray's paper illustrates the relations built by male transmigrants with local communities founded on class and nationality differences. In this, Asian male migrants are classified by locals as nerds which signifies a subordinated status due to their nationality/race, body size, sexuality, coloniality and class. In addition, male transmigrants face challenges in public places, particularly where men gather. Sports and other recreational activities in countries of destination (in this case, Australia and Canada) appear to be hyper-masculine. Whereas, Asian culture stresses hard work and financial achievement. The categorisation and resentment of nerds by hypermasculine locals created segregation and subordination. However, recent male Asian migrants are more inclined to balance work and recreational activities, largely involving and encouraging their children in doing so. Although the generational gap is somewhat narrowed, but gendered division of labour remains. Women are still designated to perform domestic tasks and childcare.

In stark similarity to such sustenance of gender divide is Ong's paper about notions of masculinity and familial roles in a Chinese family. The paper written by Ong Puay Liu, Png Puay Tee and Ong Puay Hoon explains how masculinity is contextualised and maintained from one generation to the other. Although the study was carried out in only one Chinese family, the findings are nevertheless pertinent to reflect the representation of gender inequality in many Chinese families. The division of labour on gender lines, in terms of domestic and public responsibilities and roles amongst Chinese family members, illustrates highly unequal statuses of men and women. Ironically, women themselves perpetuate such inequalities through socialisation and subservience. However, younger generation seems to have a more tolerant attitudes towards a more balanced gendered division of labour in the domestic sphere. This is largely due to education and increased exposure to 'modern' style of living.

This leads us to Au Yong Geok Lian's paper which delineates the notions of masculinity via social roles in the family. The focus was on middle class Malay and Chinese urban families. By looking at familial functions such as head of household, decision making and financial independence (personal income and savings or 'secret money'), Au Yong shows that women also possess masculine qualities, highly relevant to the performance or exchange of (conventionally gendered) social roles.

In relation to the inherently exchangeable gender roles and responsibilities is the reversal of female subjugation and male superiority. This is portrayed in two different papers written by Jariah Mohd. Jan and Karen Kow Yip Cheng, and Zuraidah bt. Mohd Don that address masculine images and identity in magazine advertisements. Men are represented in commercial advertisements as sexy, muscular, dark skin and hunky. Are those adverts (sexually) abusive of men? Or, is masculinity a dynamic role/identity conducive to social, economic and political manipulation? How is this comparable to women's subordinated and abused status which is generally stamped as sexual objects, especially in commercial advertisements?

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The symposium has been successful in achieving its aims to promote interactions between scholars from different geographical and research areas, and to explore the study of masculinity/ies. Benefitted greatly from the symposium, I therefore would like to delineate three concluding remarks, which I personally feel are pertinent.

In retrospect, which is also my first remark that, it was rather obvious that no particular definition of masculinity/ies was given at the symposium. Although Zuraidah attempted to define 'masculinity' when she presented her paper, it is however limitedly framed in physical appearances. However, the absence of a particular definition of masculinity is deemed appropriate. It has rightly uplifted the theme of the symposium—disparate masculinities, men's heterogeneous experiences, and different notions of masculinity.

Second, the theme itself prompted many pertinent questions for those papers presented at the symposium have created open spaces for inquiry, such as: has masculinity been refashioned in many forms in contemporary social, economic and political developments? Or has it always been in diverse conditions but disguised by hegemonic (Western) culture and discourses? Have gender roles been transformed and exchanged due to globalisation and other changes in the era of post-modernity? Are the different versions of masculine (and not so masculine) characteristics related to different times, spaces and cultural traditions? How do we relate one type of masculinity to another, from one historical point to another and from one culture to the other?

My third remark is that more studies are needed to develop pertaining definitions or concrete theories of masculinity. Suffice to say that it is impossible to do this in alienation from the discourse of femininity. Additionally, increased attention should be paid on men's experiences in relation to class, subaltern culture or community, domestic relations, inter-generational relations, global consumerism, etc. Emphasis is also required on the exploration of ambiguous gendered identities, images and rights, including gay, homosexual and

transgendered communities. While these minority groups pose challenges to existing gender discourses and perspectives, they illuminate prominent traits of uncertainty, fluidity and perhaps, sometimes disturbing psychological situations of human relations and identities.

\*This paper is written largely based on the author's understanding and perceptions generated from the symposium. Relevant reference was made on available papers presented at the symposium. Some paper presenters have given their papers to participants while others have not.

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