

A GLANCE AT THE LIFE OF THIRD GENDER IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

The third gender as labeled by Discovery Channel (2003) has been a common scene in Asian countries from as far as India to our own country Malaysia. The Malaysian National stream newspaper Berita Harian (2011) mentioned that there is a growing phenomenon of the Third Gender or transvestites (In Malay language it is referred to as “makyah”) and gays in recent years in Malaysia. Another report refers them to as a woman trapped in man’s body. The disturbing scene of the Third Gender has been haunting many public universities in Malaysia. In the early nineties, a study has been conducted by some universities in Malaysia pertaining to the growth of the transgender population in public universities. The report had alerted many parties especially the administrators of the University’s student affairs office in Malaysia, hence allowing them to be more aware of the growing needs to cater to this special group of student’s population. It was true when universities started organizing seminars and courses on how to tackle transvestite and gay students in university campus such as having separate hostel rooms for them to stay. On the other hands, the third gender has proven themselves to be very intelligent in academic performance as well as having high soft skills quality that has allow them to penetrate the barrier of university’s student intake. Many of them have proven to be successful graduates by becoming Fashion Designers, Interior Decorators and Journalists, let alone Managers. However, many are inclined to be in the limelight of the creative industry. Despite their popularity, their backgrounds are discreet and unknown to the masses. Many questions linger in the mind of their peers and people living with them as to their profiles and the factors that had contributed toward their special, yet peculiar behavior. This paper addresses the profiles of the third gender in the public universities especially the transvestites. It also attempts to describe the contributing factors towards becoming a transvestites and the measures taken by universities in Malaysia in handling this marginalized queer community in campus..

1. Introduction

Many have been said about the third gender in the society. Undeniably, many have also constructed bad images of the third gender. The existence of third gender people is extensively getting the society's attention from day to day.

The ways they behave are being imitated in films and dramas. They even make movies out of the third gender dilemma. "To Wong Foo", "The Iron Lady", "The Beautiful Boxer", "Bugis Street" and "Buka Api" are some of the films made to familiarize the society with the third gender. Be it in the west or in Asia, the story of the Third Gender are the same. Many are involved in the limelight of the film industry, modeling agency, artistic creation and not forgetting the tourism industry.

In the tourism industry, Thailand and Philippines in South-east Asia are well known for having the third gender playing important roles as tourist guides, service staff, and the ever popular to the lady boy entertainers and masseurs. Many were also trapped in the prostitution industry as it brings instant income to them.

The Discovery Channel shown on Astro Malaysia (May 2006) investigated on the Third gender in Asia thoroughly. The topic was "The Third Gender" and the writer had decided to adopt the label used by the documentary in writing this paper. The figure of Lily Khru, the Thai language teacher of Thailand, Shabnam Mausi, the mayor of one of the states in India, the world popular beautiful Thai boxer and a street Hijra of India were portrayed in the program. The world was served with the story of the Third gender so that they understand the dilemma of being a transvestite and also the contribution that they have lent to the world.

The annual Miss Tiffany Contest held in Phuket has drawn millions of tourists to witness the ever largest and lovely ladyboys contest in the world. Malaysia's Paper Doll has performed across Asia to portray the talents of the third gender in the entertainment world. The Phillipine "Baklak" are also well known for their pretty faces and talents in the entertainment line. Many appeared in Television as guest artists and were given a wide coverage in the electronic media.

The third gender as addressed by the public as *Maknyah* is a unique subculture group in Malaysia that has special dialect which is not easily understood by the masses. In both states the Maknyah has formed a small community with special way of talking. Apart from their femininity in the body language their communication language differs from the rest of the common society. In their effort to be secretive about their lives, they have created a form of language which is not easily grabbed and understood by the society.

In Malaysia, it is proven that the body language and the expression of Maknyah have become popular and were adopted by many filmmakers, artists and celebrities in the limelight of the entertainment industries in Malaysia as a way of forming an identity and glamorous personalities. Quoting an example of Fauziah Ahmad Daud who likes to use "akak" to refer to herself and "dek non" to refer to

second or third parties she is communicating to is a classic example of the usage of Maknyah's expression in addressing to himself and others. The extent of Maknyah's influence in films and comical acts does not just lie in the usage of words but also the body movements and language which has proven to be successful in building an identity amongst comedian such as Imuda (in the 2 + 1 comedy series). Imuda hits stardom by simply imitating the character of a Maknyah's fashion designer with his catchy lines "this is my card". Sheila Rusly sometimes uses the word "mak" to refer to herself depicting the Maknyah's way of addressing himself.

The number of third gender in Malaysia that pursue higher is increasing from day to day. Many were successful in their career after completing their tertiary education, turning to become Hotel Managers, Teachers, Lecturers, Lawyers, Doctors and so on. In the early year of 2000, there was a big debate in the local newspaper reporting that local public university was facing problems with the influx of third gender in their intake that has brought issues pertaining to hostel accommodation, cliques among them, sexual abuse and many more.

In general, the life of the third gender people has been part and partial of almost all societies in the South East Asia region. The acceptance of the third gender people in this region has been very positive and transparent, to the extent that their way of life and behaviour were depicted and adopted into films, drama as well as being transformed into a profitable item in the tourism package.

2. Definition of the Third Gender People

The third gender people are literally defined as transvestites or the so called ladyboys in Thailand. In detail, the third gender people in this paper are defined as males who possess feminine characters and feelings. They normally have the higher tendency to behave, act, talk and dress almost like women. They are also more prone towards having love affairs or relationships with their similar sex that is men than that of women as they do not have interest in the opposite gender. On the other hand, gay people are defined differently from the transvestites. Gay people are defined as those male individuals who are not feminine but having the desire of having relationships with individuals of the same sex. In Malaysia the transvestites are called as "Maknyah" or "Pondan" or "Bapok". In Thailand, the term "Katoey" refers to the Transvestites. In Tagalog, "Baklak" is the word indicating transvestites whereas in Indonesia they used a short form "Wadam" signifying both male and female gender that are Adam and Hawa (Adam and Eve). Sometimes, the Indonesian also referred to transvestites as "Bencong" and "Waria" (combination of Wanita/woman and Pria/man). In England, the short form for transvestites is "TV" although some do call them "fad". In India, the term used to describe transvestites is "Hijra". "Hijra" is a group of transvestites that moves from one place to another by performing (normally dance and singing). The traditional Indian community believes that they will be

given better luck by inviting the Hijra to perform at their house for some special occasion such as to celebrate the birth of new offspring. They also believe that the act of dancing and singing by the Hijra will bless those that hire them.

However, both gays and transvestites in this context can be categorized as homosexuals. But for the purpose of discussion in this paper, the third gender is only referred to the transvestites.

Wikipedia.Org mentions that the term transvestitism has undergone several changes of meaning and it was firstly coined in 1910 by Magnus Hirschfeld. His group of transvestites consisted of both males and females, with heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and asexual. He does not just associate clothing with transvestites but it goes more beyond simply physical interpretation. After the second world war, in both Europe and North America, transvestite behaviour until the [1960s](#) (both by male and female bodied persons) was seen as an expression of [homosexuality](#) or suppressed homosexual impulses. Also, the three-gendered framework of Hirschfeld disappeared, and the two-gender framework became the frame of reference again.

Nasirin (2005) distinguishes transvestite and gay according to the way they dress and their inclinations towards having sexual relationships with men. David Lim (2005) on the other hand mentions that a man is considered as transvestites when he dresses in women attire and behaves like ones. Both Nasirin (2005) and David Lim (2005) agree that transvestites dress in woman's clothing and behaves like women.

Nasirin (2005) however expands his discussion by mapping queerness and the literary scenes in Malaysia in the 21st century whereby he found that it has become a trend for English literature in Malaysia to include dialogues of transvestite as part of their contents. He further expands his work on queerness by pointing out that Malaysian short story writers like Raslan Kassim and Dina Zaman indirectly use transvestite characters in their publications.

Nasirin's view is supported by David Lim's (2005) paper, presented at the conference on sexualities, gender and rights in Bangkok. He describes that Maknyah characters are part of film making in Malaysia. He pointed out that even in an aggressive film like *KL Menjerit*, Maknyahs' roles were being embraced in making the film more interesting and likable.

Hence, in the context of Malaysian society, transvestites have been implicitly regarded legal and well accepted. It is proven true when the characters of transvestites portrayed in the comedy soap show of *2 +1* played by Imuda received overwhelming positive responses from audience of TV3. The same goes to the recent drama shown on Astro and TV3 channels entitled "Wali" that portrayed the actor Ahmad Tamimi Siregar playing two roles of a father and a transvestite dancer simultaneously which later receives overwhelming critics and good responses from the media as well as the audience. Another TV sitcom that extensively used transvestite character is the *Senario*, produced by TV3. It

hits stardom and was highly rated as interesting by the viewers when it was initially introduced. Recent Malay movies entitled “Apa Kata Hati”, “Anu Dalam Botol” and “Waris Jari Hantu” produced by Malaysian producers used the character of transvestites as the main plot of the movie. Similar subjects were used in drama series such as “Sotong 1” and “Sotong 2”. One distinguished point worth highlighting is that generally in Malaysia the transvestite characters add flavor to a TV show and was well accepted by the public.

3. Objectives of the Research

The general objective of the research is to investigate the profile of third gender especially the transvestites in public university. Specifically the objectives are as follows:

- a. To discover the profile of transvestites in public university.
- b. To briefly examine the factors that trigger them to become transvestites.
- c. To investigate the perception of people in the university towards transvestites.

4. Significance of the paper

This research is essential for people engaged in the study of sociology and anthropology in understanding the behaviour of transvestites in different parts of the world. It can also contribute to the understanding of behaviours of special group of people that is part of a larger society. Transvestites are also now a common phenomenon in South-east Asia and it is very important to understand their ways of lives. Students of transvestites manners will perhaps need special attention and facilities from the university. Their welfare must be clearly understood if better strategies are desired by the government. Ministry of Education, The Department of Social Affairs, The Ministry of Youth and Sports and The Ministry of Higher Education would benefit from this paper. Researchers from universities might want to perform further studies on this area.

5. Review on the Transvestite in Universities

The writer observes that little effort has been made to write on the connection between gender and tourism. After gazing through the internet, magazines and newspapers, the writer managed to discover some writings made on the existence of transvestites in higher education.

E Sempoi .com (retrieved 28 Mac 2012 at 11.21 am) mentioned about the existence of a transvestite university in Bangkok called the Lady Boy University . This university is specially tailored towards transvestite so as to avoid them from being discriminated in getting higher education. They wear female university uniforms and they are all looking pretty and sexy.

Farid Jamaludin, a reporter with the local newspaper The star (18/2/2001 Sunday) reported on the Malaysian government good intention of treating transvestites in Malaysia following a death incident of one transvestite who fail to get a court order to change her sexual status to female in her identity card. The report entitled “ Ministry to treat Transsexuals with dignity” indicated that the Ministry of Women and Family Development will refer to transsexuals in a "more dignified" way.

It was also reported that Its minister, Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, said she would take up the issue under her wing and give more dignity to the group which, according to a recent survey, numbered about 50, 000 in the country.

"Just give me some time. I will address the issue and give them a definition which is more dignified, "she said after the launch of landscaping company Cypark here yesterday."

His report was elaborated as follows:

Shahrizat was responding to a recent call by a group of transsexuals who wanted the new ministry to declare them as "women."

They want to be accorded the same rights as women - an issue last dealt with in 1986 when Datuk Abu Hassan Omar was Welfare Services Minister. Under him, the group was known as Maknyah, leading to the formation of the Federal Territory Maknyah Association.

Shahrizat said her ministry would look at issue in a "professional and objective" manner.

"We want to give this group some dignity so that they can move around in the community without being looked down upon. This is very important," she stressed.

Meanwhile, it is learnt that a unit would be set up soon to study and look into issues involving transsexuals. Problems, surrounding this community are centered on their jobs because many are qualified for certain posts but are turned away because they are still "male" in their identity cards. As a result, many have become sex workers to make a living while the fortunate few ended up in the entertainment industry or professions associated with women. (The Star, 1/2/12)

In another case, Kartini Noor (1998) the reporter for the magazine “Ibu Bapa” reported on the case of harassment faced by transsexual in Malaysia. The parent of a transsexual mentioned that they were harassed by the public before their son case was brought to court. The son who is a transsexual was then sentenced to jail and fined for acting and dressing like women. The Ikhlas Project director, Kartini Slamad, pointed out that “ We do not asked to be like this. We were sentenced by the public for our natural being”

Caesar Dealwis and Maya Khemlani David in their article entitled “ **Language And Identity Of Malay Teenage Maknyah (Transvestites) In Kuching**” in The Journal of Southeast Asian Studies studied the Seteng Language used by the transvestite in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. In their study, the transvestites being investigated are teenage Malay transvestites in urban Kuching. In their study they found out that transvestites in Sarawak possess distinct identification practices, as well as having a secret language which helps to shape their identity. The language used by them is called Bahasa Seteng. They also discovered that a transvestite is understood and accepted as a member depending on his characteristics and the use of Bahasa Seteng. They used the in-depth face to face interviews, audio taping of real time conversations, and observations, features of Bahasa Seteng as well as characteristics of the teenage transvestites. The findings revealed that identification and language practices has given them their own unique identities of transvestites.

Similar research was done by the writer in the state of Terengganu and Kelantan in Malaysia and it confirmed the finding mentioned by Caesar and Maya. In the state of Kelantan dan Terengganu, the transvestites have invented their own dialects with special features that act as a secret code which will safeguard the group from being harassed and disowned by the society. In Kelantan they add suffixes to the words while in Terengganu they only pronounce half of the full words.

Yik Koon Teh in an article in the International Journal of Transgenderism (ISSN 1434-4559) discusses a study of male transsexuals in Malaysia, known locally as *Maknyahs* that focuses on their perception towards HIV/AIDS, relationship with Islamic religion and other social elements. She mentions that the detailed study used the questionnaires and interviews approach in getting data. The questionnaire consists of 142 questions, which was divided into three parts namely the social aspect, HIV/AIDS knowledge; and related health issues. In addition to questionnaires, interviews were carried out with some of the *Maknyahs* as well as with the relevant authorities. Her research looks into the social aspect of transsexuals in Malaysia. The questions employed by the researcher were derived from studies undertaken in the West. The results of the research found that transsexuals in Malaysia have many characteristics similar to those from other parts of the world. However, the identity of the *Maknyahs* in Malaysia is influenced by cultural and religious factors. The definition and identity of male transsexuals in Malaysia may differ in some ways from those in other parts of the world.

Elizabeth Zachariah and Farhana Ab Rahman, wrote two series of report on transvestites in Malaysia entitled “ Looking at other sides of Maknyah” in the English national newspaper, New Straits Times (10/02/2011) addressing the agony, grievances and problems faced by Maknyah. They mentioned that transvestite are being shunned and marginalized for quite sometimes in Malaysia. However, no matter how bad the society feels toward them, they are still part of Malaysian community. They quoted the view of Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) president Datuk Mohd Zaman Khan which says that the

Maknyah community attracts attention because of the way they dress and act. He also agrees that they are a misunderstood lot. He further expresses his opinion by saying:

"In some places, they would be arrested for carrying ladies' handbags."

He cited that there are Maknyahs who are successful in business and at the top of the corporate ladder. And there are a whole lot of them in the beauty and entertainment industry.

Zaman also admits the dark side of Maknyah by saying that most transsexuals were denied jobs because of the way they dress, despite the fact that some of them are educated.

Many reports on the transvestites occupying seats in the university were not published. Worries and concerns on the growing need to address the issue of transvestites in public university were discussed. In the past, Universiti Teknologi MARA had implemented some programmes to alleviate hence curbing the problems of transvestites such as accommodation, sexual harassment, discrimination in class and many more. Programmes such as motivation training, religious awareness lectures, sports tournaments and cultural activities were carried out to enable them to spot their talents and put it into good use. Local literature on these areas were very limited and scarce since it is quite a taboo to openly discuss matters pertaining to transvestites and transsexual. Formal statistics on the number of transvestites in public university were not easily accessible.

5. Research Methodology

This paper is prepared by collecting secondary and primary data. Due to the nature of the topic, the writer collected information from newspapers, magazines and the internet.

In order to obtain an insight into matters pertaining to transvestites, the writer interviewed 12 transvestites from various public higher learning institutions in Kelantan namely:

- a. Four respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (the writer is currently working here)
- b. Four respondents from Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kelantan branch (located in Machang and Kota Baru)
- c. Two respondents from Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian Branch, Kelantan.
- d. Two respondents from Politeknik Kota Baru- located in Kok Lanas.

They were interviewed with the aim to have some basic personal backgrounds of transvestite studying in the public higher learning institutions.

Since the writer is based in Kelantan, obviously it is a logical decision to obtain responses from transvestites studying in universities around Kelantan. Although Kelantan has five main public higher learning institutions namely Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Medical and Allied Health campus, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kelantan, Universiti Malaya and Politeknik Kota Baru, the researcher has decided not to choose Universiti Malaya since its specializations are in Islamic Studies and they might not be willing.

The interview methods were used to obtain first hand information from the respondents. The purposive snowballing approaches were used in gaining the samples of respondents for this research. The data obtained were quoted individually and analyzed qualitatively. Opinions put forward by the respondents in the conversation during the carried out interviews were recorded and quoted as naturally as possible. The opinions were then analyzed to see the differences and similarities in the points given by the respondents. The outcomes were then illustrated manually in a tabular form.

The researchers also use observation as a way in understanding their gesture, behaviour and obtain information. In ensuring the comfort of the respondents, the researchers have to wait and follow their tight schedule, since they have to attend many classes.

The researcher also uses his previous experience in organizing special programmes for transvestites together with the students affairs department of Universiti Teknologi MARA Terengganu campus. His participative involvement with the transvestite groups is also a source of information for this research.

6. Findings

a. Basic personal data of the transvestite students

i. Age

Table 1.0: Age

Age bracket	%
18-20	42(5)
21-22	58%(7)
23-25	-
Above 25	-

Total	100 % (12)
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More than half (58%) of the transvestite interviewed were in the age bracket of 21 to 22 years old. This is due to the fact that most of them are in their second year Bachelor degree programme or third year Diploma Programme. They are school leavers and they were accepted to enter university just after their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (equivalent to “O” levels) and Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran (equivalent to “A” levels). Most of them are still young and they are very inspired, ambitious and energetic to achieve higher education qualifications.

ii. Educational background

Table 2.0: Level of their studies

Level of studies	%
Diploma	50% (6)
Degree/ Masters	50%(6)
Total	100 (12)

Half of the respondents are studying for Diploma and another half are at the Bachelor level. All of the respondents are able to speak English although not very well polished.

Table 2.1.: Area of studies

Area of studies	%
Heritage/ creative arts/ art and design	50% (6)
Business, Entrepreneurship and Banking	16.7% (2)
engineering	16.7% (2)
Medicine and Health Science	16.7% (2)
Total	100 % (12)

iii. Profession that they are interested to become

Table 3.0: Profession

Profession	%
Make-up artist	17% (2)
Professionals such teachers, bankers etc	83% (10)
Total	100% (12)

Majority (83%) of the respondents have an ambition to become professionals after graduating from university. However, 2 respondents want to become make-up artists upon graduation since they are now doing part time work as bridal make-up artists.

6.14 Family members

Table 4.0: Family members

Number of family members	%
1-3	25%(3)
4-6	67% (8)
7-10	8% (1)
More than 10	0
Total	100% (12)

67% of the respondents have family members ranging from 4 to 6 persons in a household exclusive of the parents. This is a common figure of Malaysian family which is in the range of 4 to 6 person in a family. However, the question of whether they are pampered at home is still unanswerable because only a small number of them came from small family members.

b. Any other family members as transvestites too

When posed with the question of whether any of their family members are transvestites or transgender, almost 92% mentioned that they are the only transvestites born in their family. However one respondent (8%) agreed that he has an older sibling which is also a transvestite and they are best friends at home.

c. Factors contributing to their behavior

Table 5.0: Contributing Factors to transvestitism

Fac tors	%
Family motivation	17%(2)
Peer influences	33%(4)
Personal- I want to be like this	100%(12)
Environment	8%(1)

When the respondents were asked to tick any possible factors that drive them to become transvestites or at least behave like one, all of them agree that they want to be transvestites because they are born that way. 33% mention that they are being influenced by their friends who are also transvestites. However, their own personal feelings of being a woman trapped in a man's body are very strong that it makes them behaved like one.

d. Are they being harassed by their university friends

Table 6.0Harassment

Harassed?	%
yes	67%(8)
No	33%(4)
Total	100%(12)

More than half of the respondents mentioned that they are harassed by the university friends due to their feminine behavior. This is true because being transvestite in a Moslem community is a sin and some people simply could not tolerate such behavior especially when they dressed like women.

e. In what way the harassment happen

Table 7.0: In what way the harassment happen

Harassed in what way?	%
Tease	100% (8)
Refuse talking	50%(4)
Report to the university	25%(2)
Asked them to move out of the hostel	25%(2)

For those who answered yes to the above questions, all of them said that they were being teased all the time by the friend by calling them Maknyah or Bapok when they were walking backed to the hostel or when they were together with their transvestite’s friends.

f. How is the university treating you

Table 8.0: How is the university treating you

Treatment of the university?	%
Disciplinary action for our feminine behaviour	58% (7)
Counseling activities	67%(8)
They leave us alone	33%(4)
Special activities for us	17%(2)

Counseling activities (67%) are one of the common actions taken by the university to curb the problem of transvestites. However, more than half of the respondents pointed out that they were called to the university called for a hearing simply because they wore fashionable unisex attire and behaving a feminine way.

“ We were sometimes called by the university counselor simply because we behave like girls. One counselor advised me not to make-up and he wants me to start playing soccer. Oh my god! We are like this and it is difficult for us to change. Some of my classmates are supportive but some like to belittle me. I don’t care what they want to say. I am what I am!”

g. Do you think you would continue to be like even after graduation?

Majority (83%) say “Yes” to this questions while only two respondents (17%) responded negatively quoted as follows:

“No. I will try to change my attire and behavior since I will be looking for a job after graduation”.

They also added:

“However it is not easy for us to pretend because our inner feelings is feminine”

6.8 Did your family give you consent or allow you to be like this?

Majority (92%) said no to this question because their parents are Moslems. One respondent mentioned:

“My mother cried when she knew that I wear girl’s clothes and she advised me that it is a sin to do such acts. She sometimes scolded me for behaving like a girl. My father is very fierce and I am scared of him. I knew very well that he hates the way I behave. I was sometimes asked to do carpentry works simply because he wants me to demonstrate my masculinity”.

This question infers that most parents in Malaysia are not tolerance to this queer behavior because it is against the norms of the society to behave in such a manner especially in Moslem community.

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

The third gender exists in most countries in the world and has been open to criticism by all walks of life in the society. Like any normal human being, they sought higher education for a better future. Many secured a place in a university and obtained good jobs after completing their tertiary education. However, their existence in universities is still less accepted when they were given less favorable treatment by their fellow classmates. Harassment and disciplinary actions due to the way they behave and dress has brought them to feel less accepted in the university’s system in Malaysia.

Their roles in developing the nation has been viewed as less remarkable although it is proven as successful in some part of South-east Asian countries such as Thailand. The success story of Thailand in transforming transvestites to be educated has urged transvestites around the world to emulate what has been achieved in Thailand. Thailand too has set a model of turning transvestite adventure into a profitable endeavour.

No matter how small is the contribution of the third gender people, citizen of the world has to embrace with open arms that this sub-group people in the society is not to be forgotten in making this universe a better place to live in.

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