

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This research addresses the issues of identity construction of four young Malay homosexual males living in Malaysia through the discourse of their narratives regarding their lives in the past and present; as well as their aspirations for the future. This case study aims to explore these individuals' linguistic processes and discursive strategies in the formation, negotiation and establishment of their identities in their narrative discourse. The study looks at the language they used in representing themselves; positioning themselves vis-à-vis others around them (the construction of 'us' and 'them'); relating their relationships with others; positioning themselves vis-à-vis the mainstream perceptions of gender and sexuality in order to uncover their identities and the ideologies upon which they base their life style and future aspirations. This study hopes to uncover some diverging and converging identifications of these individuals and determine whether there is a pattern of homogeneity in their identity and the strategies they employed in constructing their identity.

The data for this study are discourses of narratives communicated by four young Malay homosexual males concerning their lives in Malaysia through semi-structured interviews. Moita-Lopes (2006: 294) indicated that "narrative practices are crucial sites for social identity construction or for the study of social identity construction processes". In

discursive and narrative practices, discourse participants can engage in multiple positioning towards the characters, objects and facts that they include in their narratives. Positioning does not only bring meanings that are set by sociohistory, but also incorporates meanings that are created by the discourse participants themselves. It allows the participants to take the role of agency. As pointed out by Davies and Harré (1999: 52) (in Moita-Lopes, 2006: 296), “with positioning, the focus is on the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in certain ways and yet at the same time they are a resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions” and as a result be re-positioned. Through narratives, narrators can justify and make right a particular social identity and refuse others (Moita-Lopes, 2006). This view of narrative positioning is also corroborated by Bamberg’s three-level positioning process (2004: 336):

By talking about others and arranging them in narrative space and time (level 1) and by talking to others in the here and now (level 2), narrators engage in the creation of ‘a sense of (them as) selves’. In other words, narrators transcend the level of story contents and the interactional level of ‘How I want to be viewed by you, the audience’ and (most often implicitly) address the question ‘Who I am?’ In doing so, they position themselves vis-à-vis cultural discourses and normative (social) positions, either by embracing them or displaying neutrality, or by distancing, critiquing, subverting, and resisting them.

This study takes up the approach of discourse analysis. More specifically, it follows the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in particular a discourse-historical approach (Wodak et al., 1999; Wodak, 2001; Reisigl and Wodak, 2009). Due to the nature of this study, which involves ideologies and prejudices, the Critical Discourse-Historical Analysis approach as proposed by Wodak (1999, 2001, and 2009) is deemed appropriate to be the framework of this study. CDA views discourse, which is the language use in discursive events, as social practice that is “socially constitutive as well as socially

conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people” (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258). As the discursive events and the socio-political contexts in which they are embedded are shaped by and shape one another, this study integrates the macro-level (the ideological construction) and micro-level (the linguistic construction) of analysis as they intertwine with one another in explaining the discursive construction of identities of these individuals in their discourse.

1.1 Background of the Study

Homosexuality is a common phenomenon but it is not encouraged by most religions, societies, and cultures. In Malaysia, homosexuality is generally unacceptable. In a study done by Alagappan and Kaur (2009), their findings indicated that much of the media representation of homosexuality by one of the major Malaysian newspapers, New Straits Times, is negatively constructed. Homosexuality has been associated with and referred to as “immoral act”, “illegal”, “not halal”, “criminal offense” and “harsh punishment” (Alagappan and Kaur, 2009).

Homosexual activity involves oral sex and anal intercourse; therefore homosexuals are always the target of sodomy laws. In Malaysia, sodomy is considered a crime which is stated in Penal Code Act 574 Section 377A and B as in the following clauses.

377A. Any person who has sexual connection with another person by the introduction of the penis into the anus or mouth of the other person is said to commit carnal intercourse against the order of nature.

377B. Whoever voluntarily commits carnal intercourse against the order of nature shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to twenty years, and shall be liable to whipping. (The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia, 2006:148)

In addition to the Penal Code above, the Muslim homosexuals in Malaysia are also liable to the Syariah law in regards to sodomy. Homosexuals, if caught, may be brought to trial in a Syariah court. Islam does not condone homosexuality or same-sex union. Some states in Malaysia practice a specific Syariah law in regards to sodomy (liwat). According to the Syariah law, homosexuals if convicted may be fined up to RM5000, three years of imprisonment and/or six lashes of the whip (Zaitun Mohamed Kasim, 2006).

Regardless of the Malaysian religious, cultural and legal perception of homosexuality, it can be observed that there are many individuals who are leading the homosexual life style. If a reader were to go on the internet and type in “Gays in Malaysia”, he/she would find quite a number of web sites which cater to homosexuals in Malaysia. A few examples of the websites are www.gayscout.com; www.axcest.com; gay-melayu.com; and www.gay-datanta.com. An Utusan newspaper columnist by the pen name of Awang Selamat (2010) wrote that homosexuality has brought about much concern in the country as it was said that the number of male homosexuals is increasing (at <http://www.utusan.online.com>).

The prejudice and discriminatory behaviors and attitudes which have marginalized the homosexuals, have been researched systematically since 1970s; nonetheless, these attitudes and behaviors persist until the present time and range from the “avoidance of homosexuals to gay bashing and other hate crimes” (Kitzinger and Peel, 2005: 174). In Malaysia, following the trial case of sodomy against Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime

Minister, in 1998, People's Voluntary Anti-Homosexual Movement (PASRAH) was established in the same year. Alongside the police and the Islamic Religious Department, this organization hoped to wipe out homosexuality by imposing harsh punishments and shutting down gay gathering places (Alagappar and Kaur, 2009). There have been raids on homosexual gathering places and businesses where homosexuals were arrested. Despite the sodomy law, prejudice and discrimination upon the homosexuals, homosexuality does not seem to have been eradicated or contained. In fact, according to a travel guide website, Utopia-asia.com, gay life in Malaysia is blossoming (<http://www.utopia-asia.com>) which can be seen through the sprouting of gay bars, hotels, restaurants, spas and massage parlors.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

As discussed above, in contemporary Malaysia, it can be said that there are many men including Malay men who are identifying themselves as homosexual or 'gay' and stepping away from the longstanding traditional gender and sexual-stratified system (Jerome, 2008). Malay male (and female) sexuality conventionally had been identified to as conforming to the traditional socio-cultural and religious values through "internal form of moral-self-control" and "external control" (Shamsul and Fauzi, 2006). Men and women should behave in the ways that are appropriate and acceptable; and it is vital that they steer clear of deviant conducts (Jerome 2008; Shamsul and Fauzi, 2006). The changes in sexual behavior of Malay men in this modern time have challenged the mainstream view about sexuality and sexual identity, and there is a need for a new understanding of how Malay men define their identities in relation to sexuality.

However, in Malay society, sexuality is still widely perceived as taboo and is rarely discussed openly and directly in public. This accounts for the inadequacy of discussions on Malay sexuality or sexual identities, especially the sexual identities of the Malay male (Jerome, 2008). Most of the “current discussions on the formation of Malay identity, and the concept of Malayness in Malaysia make direct references to political history, race, ethnicity, and nationality (Vickers, 2004), which further informs concepts of nation, ruler, and religion (Bangsa, Raja dan Negara)” (Samsul, 2004). For the most part, Malays in Malaysia have always been identified as those who hold fast to the religion of Islam, and as such Malay sexuality should always confine to what is right according to the Islamic values. Identities are more complex and ambiguous (Jerome, 2008) to simply be described as a very clear-cut identification and concept.

Malay identifications insofar may be viewed as prescribed identity, and homosexuality is absolutely made absent in these identifications. Homosexual lifestyles and conducts are deemed as abnormal and a transgression of the Malay cultural norms and values. This partially explains why there is so much prejudice surrounding homosexuality. However, in modern time and societies, self is becoming more flexible and no longer “fixed, stable and largely God-given” (Plummer, 1995: 92). The Malays, especially the younger generation are also becoming more complex. There are many young men who are now more diverse in their sexual choice and desires as depicted in their communication via cyberspace (Jerome, 2008). It will be enlightening to study the construction of identities of the Malays, especially the Malay homosexual youth, so that the new insights offered by new studies can be a resource in an effort to improve the communication between the heterosexual society and the homosexuals.

1.3. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to explore:

- how the participants of this study discursively construct their identities through their language use in the narrations of their life experiences and aspirations in the interview-cum-conversation.
- how the participants of this study position themselves against the dominant traditional sexual/gender ideologies in constructing their identities in the narrations of their life experiences and aspirations in the interview-cum-conversation.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the identities constructed by the subjects of the study through their language use in narrating their life experiences and aspirations in the interview-cum-conversation?
2. What are the discourse strategies they use in their narrative to discursively construct their identities through their positions against the dominant sexual/gender ideologies?
3. What are the linguistic means including lexical (such as metaphoric and metonymic) references and linguistic structures (such as modal verbs) that they use in constructing their identities in the narration of their life experiences and aspirations in the interview-cum-conversation?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Whenever the issue of homosexuality is mentioned in Malaysia, it is often through the voice of the dominant group, the heterosexuals. The voice of the marginalized group is seldom heard. As reported by Alagappar and Kaur (2009), most of the homosexual issues in the media in Malaysia were presented greatly through the views of politicians, religious leaders and relevant authorities while the voices of the homosexuals themselves were absent. The findings of this study will provide voices of four homosexual individuals. This study does not attempt to generalize the findings to the whole homosexual community in Malaysia; however, it is hoped that the findings will provide an insight into how some of the young Malay homosexuals perceive and reflect upon themselves and the dominant sexual ideology of their society. Perhaps this study will be able to initiate an effort towards a better communication and understanding between the marginalized homosexuals and the mainstream society.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

The study confines itself to interviewing four young Malay homosexual male individuals. Due to the issue of investigation is about the discursive construction of identity through the linguistic repertoire and the linguistic strategies used by the participants of the study, which requires rigorous and in-depth linguistic analysis, the number of respondents chosen to participate in this study is small. The finding of this study does not reflect the identity construction of the whole homosexual community in Malaysia. In addition, because the topic of the study is taboo and personal, the data may have certain constraints due to the

possibility that the participants may feel wary to disclose everything about their lives and feelings to the researcher.

1.7 Conceptual Definitions

Homosexual: This study defines homosexual as one whose sexual desire and behavior are directed to a person or persons of the same sex. This study focuses on male homosexuals or gays who may have had sexual relationship with a person or persons of his own gender and also those who may not have had any sexual relationship with a person or persons of his own gender but have desire and interest in having a sexual relationship with other men.

Discourse: Discourse is the language use for expressing one's knowledge, value and experience of the world. Through discourse, one can claim power and knowledge to resist and critic ideologies and power relations. "Discourses are used in everyday contexts for building power and knowledge, for regulation and normalization, for the development of new knowledge and power relations, and for hegemony" (McGregor, 2003). In this study, the discourse is life-experiences of young Malay men living as homosexuals among the dominant heterosexual society in Malaysia.

Narratives: Stories. Through their stories, the narrators are given the opportunity to not only "represent social worlds and evaluate them, but also to establish themselves as members of particular groups" (de Fina, 2006) through their linguistic repertoire. In this case study, the participants narrated stories about their life experiences as homosexuals in Malaysia in the past, present as well as their hopes and expectations for the future.

Discourse-historical approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (DH): Discourse-historical approach is a branch of CDA; therefore it adheres to the tenets of CDA. CDA sees discourse as “social action” which is “socially constitutive” and “socially conditioned” (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258) and therefore, in analyzing a discourse, DH asserts that it is crucial to integrate “as much available information as possible on the historical background and the original sources in which the discursive ‘events’ are embedded” (Wodak et al., 1999: 7-8). DH analysis goes beyond the linguistic analysis (micro-level). It also incorporates the macro-level analysis (context-social structure – power, dominance, ideology, hegemony).

Self and other: Self in this study is the Malay homosexual self constructed by individual young Malay homosexual subjects in the study. Contrary to self, ‘other’ is the external entity from self, in this case – the heterosexuals.