CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Sexual dichotomy was born on the seventh day of the creation of humankind. Man was first created and from his ribcage, a rib was pulled out. From it, his partner, a woman, was fleshed out. The ribcage, interestingly, is the structure of ribs that protects the heart and lungs. This simple act sealed the fate of mankind. Man, from then on, became the provider and protector and woman, the receiver and the protected.

This episode in the creation of humankind set the precedent for the dichotomy between sexes which is still evident today, thousands of years later. It becomes more apparent because manhood is not a clearly defined state. In most cultures, females are recognised as having attained irrevocable womanhood at the onset of menstruation (Gilmore, cited in Levant, 1995:134). Once their bodies declare them capable of conceiving a child, their culture declares them women. Ergo, they have no cause to doubt their essential womanhood and feminity because in most cultures these are never in question. Unfortunately this is not the case with manhood. Across cultures, as Gilmore (cited in Levant, 1995:134) notes, real manhood is not a simple equation of anatomy. It is an unspoken test of earning the right to become a man by proving one’s mettle. Hence the attainment of manhood is a subjective matter of achievement.
What happens then when there are no clear rules on the playing field? People make up ‘rules’ that they think apply. These ‘rules’ come in the form of theories postulated by experts. Among them are the one-sex model, male sex drive, the male physique and functionalist theory which will be elaborated in the next chapter. They all share one common understanding, that is, men are the superior sex and women the inferior. These theories only lend strength to the perpetuation of the idea of superiority of one sex.

Economics too abetted the continuation of the superiority myth. In the days of old, men were the hunters and gatherers who valiantly fought vicious animals and brought home the bacon to feed the women and children. Fast forward centuries later, men went out to back-breaking spheres of work like fields, mines, factories and offices while women played a nurturing role looking after children and creating a comfortable environment for the men to return to. This can be attributed to the fact that “girls learn that much of the work men do is associated with ‘male’ characteristics such as aggression, strength, stamina, competitiveness, ambition and a technical and analytic mind, which are qualities that conflict with the myth of femininity” (Sharpe, 1976:176). In short, the economic needs of society back then aided the sustainance of the age-old ‘men protector, women protected’ syndrome.

However, changes in the new world order prove that theories like these do not have much ground to stand on. Instead as Petersen notes

... there is a widely felt sense that the contemporary period marks a decisive point in terms of thinking about established cultural understandings of the masculine and about the possibilities
for reshaping male identities on the basis of radically new conceptions of the person.

(1998:19)

This reshaping of male identities includes the inexorable assimilation of feminine qualities when men learn that many of the masculine ideals learned early on in life have lost ground. As a result, men have to forge a new middle path between traditional masculinity and the sensitive man ideal, resulting in a newly modified masculinity.

1.1 Rationale of the Study

The globe has not stopped spinning since its creation. In this time, humankind has learnt to dance to the tune of its spin by consistently adapting and re-adapting itself to the constant, unremitting change. History is a treasure trove of tales of continuous human revolutions along the ages. Sociology has long documented the human responses to these shifting sands of time from the Bronze Age, Industrial Age to the present day Information Age. Each period of change offers new understanding of the social order. Humans, being profoundly social by nature, are easily marshalled by the social pattern of the day.

Not in many years has the world witnessed such an impact as the newest and potentially most powerful tidal wave to ever sweep the globe. Its name is globalisation. It has set a new world order whose music the planet is dancing to. Its pervasive effects are deeply entrenched in every fabric of every society on earth.
Needless to say, Malaysia too is imbued with the spirit of globalisation. Its forceful wave has seen the abandonment of the dependence on agriculture as an economic backbone to the embracement of information and computer technology (ICT) which is the mainstay of globalisation. The National IT Agenda (NITA), launched in 1996, bears testament to this. Its vision is “to utilise ICT to transform all of Malaysian society into an information society, then to a knowledge society and finally to a values-based knowledge society” (Blueprint for the ICT Age, 2001:20).

Preparations for the achievement of such aspirations for the future of the country are already under way. The presence of ICT is clearly seen in the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) which is 15 kilometres wide and 50 kilometres long and houses two of the world’s first “smart” cities, Cyberjaya and Putrajaya (Blueprint for the ICT Age, 2001:20).

The future of Malaysian citizens has, hence, been charted. The pervasiveness of globalisation is felt by all quarters. The mushrooming of telecommunication businesses, computer industries, international retail outfits, food and beverage chains are visible imprints of this technology. Changes of such magnitude never happen in seclusion. Instead they create a processional effect, triggering a chain reaction in all other facets of society. In the same way, Malaysia’s shift from an agrarian economic base to an ICT base has, without doubt, created waves in other local sectors. This study aims to look at one ripple in the social pool, which is the course being undertaken by gender roles, as a result of the present scenario. Many questions arise. How has the current climate affected gender roles in Malaysia? Will men still cling
to their traditional roles and continue to embody much of the ingrained domination? Will the current social and economic climate blur the demarcation lines between the sexes? Will there be a new form of masculinity evident as a result of all the changes in society?

1.2 Research Questions

Gender studies is not a new area of academic exploration. However, the scope has always been focused on feminism and feminist theories. The reason for the prolific studies is because of the awareness of the inequality inflicted upon women in almost every sphere, notably employment, in every corner of the world. Feminism has sought to re-address the imbalance of the gender scales. While great strides were being made in this area, men's studies were on the back burner. This research attempts to redress this academic imbalance by seeking answers to the following research questions.

1. How much of traditional masculinity is evident in a local men's magazine?

2. To what extent has capitalism influenced the concept of masculinity in Malaysia?

3. How is masculinity in Malaysia represented in a local men's lifestyle magazine?
1.3 Instrument

An analysis of 12 issues of the Malaysian edition of *For Him Magazine* (*FHM*) from October 2000 till September 2001 is carried out to answer the research questions. *FHM* is the only international-based magazine which has a local chapter in Malaysia. This magazine was chosen as an instrument of study because of this international affiliation. The potent forces of globalisation have ensured that Malaysia is not cocooned against the happenings around the world. Malaysians, too, without doubt swim with the tide of world events, adopting the many fashionable trends that arrive at local shores via the media. Interestingly, these new acquisitions are re-fashioned ala Malaysian style. *FHM Malaysia*, while leaning on its international roots, has set its pulse on this new eclectic Malaysian male. Furthermore, its only recent entry into Malaysia in 1998, ensures its fresh insights without the added baggage of old ways. Columns that appear in every issue (see Section 4.2), special feature articles (see Section 4.3), interviews (see Section 4.4) and advertisements (see Section 4.5), will all be categorised and analysed in this research.

1.4 Significance of Study

Literature on gender studies, especially in relation to feminism abound. It has only been in recent times that it is felt that there is a case for men's studies. Hence prominent sociologists like Victor Seidler (1991), Roger Horrocks (1994) and Jeff Hearn together with David Morgan (1995) have started to make inroads in this field. However the context and subjects in which their research are founded on, is a homogeneous Western society, which cannot be
taken as a sum total of mankind. As Connell notes, “discourse about masculinity is constructed out of five per cent of the world’s population, in one region of the world” (cited in Pease, 2000:7). So research done in men’s studies to date, is only a drop in a small pond. Very little research in this field has been carried out in this part of the world, especially Malaysia. While it can be argued that globalisation has removed the previous walls that hemmed local traditions in, creating a borderless world, social and economic mechanisms in the West cannot be applied totally in a Malaysian context. Hence research done so far in men’s studies is inadequate to capture the essence of Malaysian masculinity. It is hoped this study will provide an insight into this uncharted area. Malaysian men have been playing the traditional male role for a long time. They have been the recognised leaders of societies and families. It has been their incomes that have supported many a family. Yet current sociological trends suggest that their dominating roles are being taken over. For example, in 1998, girls formed 54.5% of the 79,014 students enrolled in public schools and female students outnumber males in almost all public universities in the country, making up 70% of the students (Women of Today, 2001:37). This can only imply that gender roles will definitely change in future, gravitating towards a reshaping of the male identity in Malaysia.

1.5 Limitation of Study

While this study provides an insight into the gender mechanisms at work in Malaysian society, specifically the male gender, it focuses only on one magazine. This is the Malaysian edition of the international men’s magazine
*FHM*, although other men's magazines like *GQ*, *Men’s Review* are also available. However it is felt that *FHM Malaysia*, to a large extent, serves its purpose as a reliable barometer as will be seen in the next chapter.

As this research is focused on masculinity per se in Malaysia, the ethnic issue will not be considered. Malaysian masculinity in this study is viewed as a homogeneous spectrum, encompassing all the races in Malaysia. This is because this researcher believes that though racial influences play a big role in the every day life of the average Malaysian man, the new world order sets certain unifying strands of masculinity that transcend racial mores. In this study, masculinity in Malaysia is seen through these unifying strands.