

**MAK NYAH CABARET DANCE PERFORMANCE AT
THREE NIGHTCLUBS IN KLANG VALLEY**

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**CULTURAL CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA
KUALA LUMPUR**

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ABSTRACT

Mak Nyah Cabaret Dance Performance at Three Nightclubs in Klang Valley

Transgendered women in Malaysia are known as Mak Nyah. The term refers to “woman in transition”. Mak Nyah performances such as stand up comedy and dance performances at weddings, nightclubs, corporate events existed even before the 1980s but these performances were not strictly policed by the Malaysian state. With the 1980s political motive to uphold the *Asian Values*, increased Islamization and establishment of the 1983 Fatwa Law in Malaysia, the state, media, and nation’s perception towards transgendered people, particularly the Mak Nyah community, have been affected at large. These groups were often oppressed, stigmatised and ostracised.

In this thesis, I discuss the economies of visibility in relation to spectatorship and agency. Political agenda and religious constraints have made it difficult for Mak Nyah artists to publicly and openly express themselves via speech, performance, and attire. In this process, they have slowly lost their voice, access, and visibility in public spaces. However, Mak Nyahs are able to express their desired gender through agencies such as cabaret dancing. Mak Nyah cabarets are variety shows that comprise of dance, music, parade, and stand-up comedy and appeals to spectators. Three nightclubs that I investigate in Klang Valley hire these Mak Nyah dancers as they are often seen involving and engaging their spectators during performances and giving audiences a positive experience.

Through the intersection of dance, history, and ethnology, this thesis examines how dance has allowed Mak Nyah cabaret dancers, in chosen nightclubs, Club A, B and C, the platform for visibility through agency and spectatorship. This thesis also traces the survival, mobility, and flexibility of Mak Nyah cabaret dancers by focusing on performances in the nightclubs and real-life narratives outside the nightclubs.

ABSTRAK

Pertunjukan Tarian Kabaret Mak Nyah di Tiga Kelab Malam di Lembah Klang

Wanita transgender di Malaysia dikenali sebagai Mak Nyah. Pertunjukan Mak Nyah sering dipersembahkan di majlis perkahwinan, kelab malam dan acara korporat tetapi persembahan jenis ini tidak dikawal oleh mana-mana perbadanan ataupun institusi di negara Malaysia sebelum tahun 1980an. Pada tahun 1980an, motif politik untuk menguatkuasakan “Asian Values” dan juga penubuhan undang-undang Fatwa pada tahun 1983 di Malaysia telah mempengaruhi persepsi rakyat, media dan kerajaan terhadap masyarakat transgender, terutamanya masyarakat Mak Nyah.

Dalam tesis ini, saya membincangkan “Economics of Visibility” yang berhubung dengan teori “Agency” dan “Spectatorship”. Agenda politik dan kekangan daripada agama telah merumitkan keadaan bagi para seniman Mak Nyah kerana mereka tidak dibenarkan mengekspresi diri mereka menerusi ucapan, pertunjukan, dan pakaian mereka secara terbuka di kalangan masyarakat umum. Oleh itu, Mereka beransur-ansur kehilangan suara, akses, dan sering ditindas. Namun, Mak Nyah diberi peluang untuk mengekspresikan diri mereka menerusi persembahan kabaret yang terdiri daripada tarian, muzik, dan perarakan. Tiga kelab malam yang saya siasat di Lembah Klang mengupah penari-penari Mak Nyah ini kerana mereka sering menghiburkan dan menarik perhatian penonton sambil memberi penonton pengalaman yang positif.

Melalui persimpangan tarian, sejarah, dan etnologi, tesis ini meneliti bagaimana tarian telah membenarkan penari kabaret Mak Nyah di kelab malam A, B dan C, ruang untuk mengekspresi dan dilihat melalui teori “Agency” dan “Spectatorship”. Tesis ini juga menyiasat kehidupan penari kabaret Mak Nyah dari segi persembahan mereka di kelab malam dan naratif kehidupan masyarakat Mak Nyah di luar kelab malam.

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University of Malaya

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

One of the aspects of understanding the Mak Nyah society and its culture is by studying the Mak Nyah cabaret dance. Within the entertainment and performance industry, the Mak Nyah cabaret dance has become ritualized performances for Mak Nyahs in Klang Valley.

The name given to male-to-female transgender women in Malaysia is Mak Nyah. Slamah (2005) says Mak Nyah “derives from mak (mother)” (p. 99). Slamah goes on to state the local community of transwomen in the 1980s wanted to create an identity for themselves as well as to alleviate their status in the society (p. 99). As such, they declared themselves Mak Nyah to distinguish themselves from other non-normative sexuality groups such as “gay men, transvestites, cross dressers, drag queens, and other ‘sexual minorities’” (p. 99).

Mak Nyah is preferred by Malaysian transwomen as opposed to various derogatory terms such as “pondan” and “bapok”, which were previously used by Malaysians when referring to “soft” men, effeminate men, transsexuals, and cross-dressers. These terms are also considered slurs, which are variously directed to gay men as well as transgendered individuals. The term Pak Nyah, though uncommon, refers to transmen, according to Peletz (2009, p. 237).

History showed that transgendered artists were visible and played key roles in the Malay archipelago as shamans, royal courtiers, and revered performers between the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Goh, 2014).

Mak Nyah cabaret performance is a relatively new phenomenon. It emerged in the Klang Valley in the late 1980s. I speculate based on historical findings that Kuala Lumpur and Selangor are less conservative locations compared to others, and this led

to the blooming of Mak Nyah Cabarets. Syariah Laws are ambiguously less restrictive and not as radical as in the eastern Peninsula states of Terengganu and Kelantan. Mak Nyah cabaret performances are often performed in nightclubs and at private functions in convention centres, event halls, and hotels. Mak Nyah cabaret performance is a variety show that comprises of dance, popular tunes, miming and stand-up comedy. Mak Nyah performers can be seen dancing and lip-synching to handbag dance music, a type of music that started in the 1980s disco era and is popular in gay nightclubs. Most handbag music contains vocals of female vocalists or popular idols. Occasionally, Mak Nyahs appear in saree, kebaya, and cheongsam to give their performance a somewhat localized taste or to adhere to certain dance themes such as Bollywood Nights or Diva Nights at the nightclubs. Mak Nyahs perform solo and also in groups. Though their dance performances would often be well-synchronized and choreographed, most of them do not have professional dance training. They learn dance routines or sequences by watching popular dance-themed movies such as *Moulin Rouge* (2001) or *Shall We Dance* (2004), dance music videos of pop idols like Jennifer Lopez and Lady Gaga, and Youtube videos of cabaret productions such as the Ziegfeld Follies and of Thai Kathoey's dance companies such as Tiffany and Alcazar. I assert that Mak Nyah cabaret dance is the main crowd-puller at nightclubs in the Klang Valley.

Mak Nyah Cabaret places performers on the same level as the spectators. As seats are usually close to the stage and performers are constantly moving fluidly up and down stage, these performers can see and hear the audience while trying to provoke and please them. For example, if you get a seat in the first row, you might think you are lucky, until a big and fat Mak Nyah starts approaching you to rub your face between her fake breasts and later rewards you with a big, red lipstick kiss on the

forehead. What happens in a show depends on the dynamic between the performer and the audience. Mak Nyah cabaret dance performers feed off the spectator's energy. When the audience engages with dancers by cheering, clapping, wolf-whistling, and laughing at a performer, the feeling can be congregational and euphoric, as everyone in the room has not just participated in the performance, but also contributed to it. Mak Nyah Cabaret dance often has provocative, erotic and sexually suggestive elements that are often incorporated into performances. All the singing is of course lip-synced. Mak Nyah Cabaret dance has no rules. The dance steps are created by using improvisations and by observing dance and music videos on YouTube.

Cabaret is a live entertainment consisting of dancing, singing, or comedy acts that are performed in the evening in restaurants or nightclubs. Most of the performers have had breast implant surgery and these transgendered women, especially the good quality ones (according to the Mak Nyah dancers I have interviewed) are tall, slim and pretty with great body proportions. They also don elaborate makeup and a good deal of well-practiced facial expressions. These cabaret-like shows pay tribute to the creme de la creme of the female persona; from Hollywood glam and disco divas to mythical creatures and legends of the Orient, in shows that feature spectacular extravaganza-type sets and costumes. To add some fun, comedy skits are normally added to the performance. These fascinating and highly artistic performers captivate audiences with their charm, unique creativity, and flawless female impersonations. A Mak Nyah dance performance promises an evening of polished and mostly enjoyable entertainment for spectators of all backgrounds.

The Mak Nyah Cabaret attracts audiences from all types of backgrounds. Performers not only morph from men to women, but also from one character to the other by using makeup, costumes, gestures, and dance movements. They emulate

actions of female idols by copying the dance style of those idols. Using heavy makeup and wearing elaborate women's clothing is not acceptable in public because they would face threats and harassment from the police and religious authorities. However, nightclubs offer them a safe space to express their fantasies.

My study on Mak Nyah dance performances in nightclubs in the Klang Valley examines the economies of visibility related to spectatorship and agency of Mak Nyah dancers through ethnographic accounts of these performers inside and outside the clubs. I will trace the historical development of Mak Nyah cabaret in the Klang Valley, as well as examine how the nightclub space provides visibility and power to the Mak Nyah dancers to perform. In my research, I use nocturnal ethnography from Marta E. Savigliano (1997) to study three nightclubs in the Klang Valley that are popular for Mak Nyah cabaret performances. My thesis aims to capture and examine the complex subjectivities of Mak Nyah dancers working in night spaces and economies, as well as the object/subject realms in research.

I investigate how Mak Nyah dancers obtain visibility through spectatorship and agency in their dances within these spaces. Thus far, no scholarship has exclusively covered Mak Nyah Cabaret dance performance in nightclubs. Previous scholarship has only focused on the social and psychological aspect of the Mak Nyah community in Malaysia, but not the dance aspect. This thesis extends previous scholarship on Mak Nyahs through a new research trajectory that focuses on a unique intersection of dance, gender, and sexuality.

My study on Mak Nyah performers in Klang Valley focuses on the lives of these performers both onstage and offstage. I will examine not only the historical development of Mak Nyah cabaret in Klang Valley but also how the nightclub space provides a safe space for the Mak Nyah artists to perform. I will research three

popular nightclubs in Klang Valley that have regular Mak Nyah cabaret performances.

Background of Study

According to Teh (1998), there are about 10,000-20,000 Mak Nyahs in Malaysia.

About 70-80 per cent of these Mak Nyahs are Malays whereas the remainder are made up of Chinese, Indian, and other minority ethnic groups such as Punjabi, Eurasian, Iban and many more. Islam is the religion of the Malay population and is the official religion of Malaysia, all Malays in Malaysia are Muslim, and hence, the majority of ss are Muslim. In A. R. (2014), it shows that the Mak Nyah community has risen to 60,000. 70 per cent of that number identifies themselves as Muslims. Mak Nyahs, especially Muslim Mak Nyahs in Malaysia have no avenues to turn to for help or advice. They face instant discrimination, be it from the society or their family members for coming out as Mak Nyahs. Work is hard to come by for them because of their ambiguous appearance and many people sadly treat Mak Nyah as freaks and as those having mental illnesses.

To make matters worse, Mak Nyahs who have undergone sex reassignment surgery (SRS) cannot have their new sex listed on their identification card as it is not permitted by the fatwa law. As far as the National Registration Department of Malaysia is concerned, SRS or not, a Mak Nyah's gender remains as the one stated on their birth certificate. The same problem surfaces when Mak Nyahs want to use or change their new name, usually of the opposite sex, for their identity cards. They must produce medical documents as proof but still, their gender will be listed as according to their birth certificate.

Islam permits Khunsa (hermaphrodites) to undergo sex change operation so that a person can be categorized as a female or a male. However, Islam forbids males to behave like females in respect to cross-dressing, wearing make-up, injecting hormones to their breast, and undergoing sex change operations. In 1983, the Conference of Rulers in Malaysia decided that fatwa prohibiting sex reassignment surgeries and cross-dressing should be imposed on all Muslims. However, only hermaphrodites were permitted to have sex reassignment surgery. Thus, Muslim Mak Nyah are seen as a violation of the tenets of Islam and therefore, can be charged at the Syariah (Islamic) Court.

Although their identity is problematic, these Mak Nyahs are often seen participating in Mak Nyah beauty pageants, working as cabaret dancers other and holding jobs such as Mak Andam (bridal makeup artists), models, stylists, cooks, and also business owners. For example, Nur Sajat, Mak Nyah cabaret dancer turned multi-millionaire entrepreneur. Nur Sajat was a former cabaret dancer, transgendered beauty queen turned business woman/cosmetic millionaire in Malaysia (Melvister, 2015). She created media controversy when she claimed that she was born a Khunsa, a person with both male and female sexual organs. Netizens on social media however, questioned her claims as the doctor who “certified” her, as Khunsa was no longer attached to the hospital where her certification was produced (Astro Awani, 2017). Nur Sajat is admired for her business success, yet, at the same time in constant media and public scrutiny of her personal gender and sex orientation. There is a YouTube video of her interview on the Mak Nyah community with TV3 (EKSKLUSIFTV1, 2012), a Malaysian national television channel.

I initially identified eight nightclubs within Klang Valley that offer Mak Nyah cabaret performances but for the purpose of this thesis, I have decided to narrow

down my scope and focus on three nightclubs, Club A, Club B, Club C. These three clubs are located within Klang Valley. I have chosen these venues based on my preliminary study, which shows that these clubs offer more frequent weekly scheduled shows compared to other clubs and other private corporate performances that are also infrequent. Also, there is a jarring difference between these clubs. Club A caters to the elite crowd such as royalties, multi-millionaire business tycoons, celebrities, and white collared professionals who are mostly heteronormative (“straight” people), Club B caters to a majority of non-heteronormative customers (gay people), and Club C caters to middle-aged locals and tourists who are also mostly heteronormative (“straight” people).

For the purpose of this thesis, I have conducted nocturnal ethnography (where my fieldwork focused on activities at night to the early hours of morning). As a nocturnal researcher reaching out to the invisible lives of night time Mak Nyah cabaret dancers, I had to turn native, just like my respondents, I dutifully station myself at the three nightclubs I investigate at 10pm till 3am on show days while only having 4 hours of sleep after before I go back to my corporate job the next day. The researcher in me became empathic with the workers' precariousness and made me miss an ordinary diurnal life, however, the field work was absolutely important to convey knowledge that I've gained on the workers of the nocturnal work scene, invisible otherwise to the diurnal eye and mind.

I carried out observations, jotted notes, conducted interviews, and viewed live performances, videos and photos of performances (with consent) by Mak Nyah dancers at these night clubs, convention centres, halls, and hotels. Their performances onstage in the clubs and lives offstage (outside the clubs) are also researched and analyzed.

I was informed that FT (pseudonym), formerly one of the cabaret clubs with the longest running Mak Nyah performance, had employed the most number of Mak Nyahs in Klang Valley. FT had as many as three two-hour cabaret shows a week during its prime time. Unfortunately, due to lower wages compared to the other clubs, Mak Nyah dancers unanimously agreed to stop performing at FT. There are as many as 30 full-time Mak Nyah performers in Klang Valley. Out of all the Mak Nyah dance groups in Klang Valley, the most popular group is the FK Divas. Mak Nyah Cabaret performances are currently in-demand, thus, allowing these Mak Nyah performers the economic power to choose the venues to perform based on the wages offered by these clubs. The growing numbers of nightclubs that offer Mak Nyah Cabaret dance performances demonstrate that this form of dance is becoming more popular and, hence, it is important to study Mak Nyah Cabaret dance performances. To these Mak Nyah dancers, cabaret dancing presents itself as a symbolic space, where these Mak Nyah minorities can fight against the debilitating patriarchal conception of gendered bodies and sexualities. Cabaret dancing is an emblematic space in which Mak Nyah dancers are able to express themselves using their costumes, body movements and artistry in a way that gives them agency. During the short duration when they are on stage, these Mak Nyah cabaret dancers are free from societal demands as their ability to impress the crowd gains them respect from the audiences. For that evanescent moment, the dancers are subjects and dominatrices, submitting spectators to the splendour of their eroticised bodies. The lustful suggestiveness of the cabaret dance transforms the dancers into liberated subjects, who have broken free from the limitations of law and society.

Most nightclubs in Malaysia are located in the Klang Valley, where city dwellers have higher spending power, but also because Klang Valley are less conservative

compared to other states such as the PAS (Pan-Malayan Islamic Party) run states of Kelantan, and Kedah and Terengganu. For example, public caning under Islamic Law is conducted in the state of Kelantan (Surach, Mohsen & Singh, 2017). The objectives listed in the next section were used throughout the research to ensure that the necessary aims or goals are dealt with within the timeframe of research.

Objectives

1. This study examines the challenges and struggles of Mak Nyahs and their involvement in the history of cabaret dance performance in Malaysia.
2. This study analyzes the aspects of cabaret dance that enable Mak Nyahs to gain agency at the nightclubs.
3. This study explores how “invisible” Mak Nyahs emerge as “hypervisible” cabaret dance performers at three nightclubs in the Klang Valley.
4. This study examines how spectators shape the Mak Nyah cabaret dance performance.

Research Methods

This research begins with archival study that comprises of library search. Secondary data is collected via Gayatri Reddy’s *With Respect to Sex* (2005), Paul Chatterton’s *Urban Nightscapes* (2003), and Michael G. Peletz’s *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia Since Early Modern Times*, as well as articles, encyclopaedias, photographs, video recordings and YouTube videos of reality series like *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

This study relies heavily on an ethnographic research approach. I conducted nocturnal ethnography as my fieldwork observation required me to be in the field

from 10pm till 3am, the performing hours for Mak Nyah dancers. I also conducted participant-observations, interviews, and also documented visuals materials via photos and videos. According to Savigiano (1997), nocturnal ethnography is where a researcher conducts his or her research at midnight till the wee hours of the morning. Nocturnal is different from evening events as they are not a continuation of the day or part of a daily routine. Nocturnal ethnography is a research of lives in the night of a different time zone and dimension, outside of the typical 9am to 5pm working hours. Mak Nyah Cabaret Dance performances typically start after 10pm and end at 3am. There were safety concerns too as snatch thieves and robberies are common in the Klang Valley. Hence, I had to always be alert and use common sense while navigating the night space.

Extensive reading of books, articles, and newspapers was done as a pre-fieldwork preparation to equip myself with sufficient knowledge about the Mak Nyah cabaret and its community. A diachronic analysis on the world of Mak Nyah cabaret was done to provide a better understanding on what to expect in Klang Valley's Mak Nyah culture. Readings such as Peletz (2009), Thiagarajan (2012), Reddy (2005) and other publications on dance, gender and sexuality were crucial for this research.

Primary Data was obtained through numerous intimate observations on the Mak Nyah cabaret dances in these nightclubs where I was by the club managers, owners and performers as a researcher, patron and guest. I attended Mak Nyah dance performances, rehearsals onstage and also observed them backstage. Through these methods, the characteristics of movement were observed and the physical attributes of the dance were identified. Gestures and movements performed by these Mak Nyah artists were analyzed to identify how they were used as a tool for empowering their freedom of speech and performance. Extensive interviews were conducted together

with video recordings of weekly Mak Nyah performance shows in Club A, Club B and Club C. Details such as dance routines, frequency of rotation of performers during the cabaret shows, and expressions and reactions of the audience were also recorded. Informants also shared stories about their struggles outside the nightclubs.

Participation-observation was conducted to acquire a better understanding about Mak Nyah cabaret performance in nightclubs in the Klang Valley. Participation-observation is an important approach to allow direct interaction such as cheering and clapping during dance performances, observing them backstage in the dressing room and in off-stage interviews with the Mak Nyah community and Mak Nyah cabaret performers in the nightclubs. The interaction created a better rapport and closer understanding between my informants and me. When observing Mak Nyah dance cabarets in Club A, B and C, I found myself assuming the roles of participant, spectator and observer. I had to be part of the performance as a spectator, yet at the same time had to pull away from complete immersion due to my role as a researcher (Pilcher, 2016, p. 6). As a spectator, I often found myself questioning my relationship with the dancers, the subjects that I interview, fellow spectators and audiences. I did not want to form a biased perception towards these Mak Nyah dancers and, at the same time, be influenced by societal stereotypes of these Mak Nyahs by the people around me.

Besides interviews with main Mak Nyah informants, Shir D, Mich N, Lynn D, CP, YR, Kumar, Adrian, ACY, SK, AO (all pseudonyms), I also conducted online interviews with Mak Nyah activists and LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Intersex) groups such as Pink Triangle Foundation to obtain vital information and data, as it is an effective way to reach out to informants versus face-to-face interviews. Informal interviews were conducted with nightclub guests,

owners, managers, staff, and disc jockeys of the nightclubs to understand the background of the Mak Nyah dancers.

Limitation of Research

Although there are as many as seven nightclubs within Klang Valley that offer Mak Nyah Cabaret performances, I have narrowed down my research to three main nightclubs that are currently the most popular nightclubs in Klang Valley. However, I managed to interview informants and record performances only in two nightclubs. This is because only two out of three nightclubs allowed me to take videos and photographs and also permitted their managers and performers to be interviewed. Anyhow, I observed and took notes in the nightclub that prohibited me from conducting interviews. Preliminary study showed that the three nightclubs offered more weekly shows than other clubs in the Klang Valley. It was not possible to examine all the nightclubs for this study.

Making appointments with informants posed another problem. Most of them held full-time positions or were busy with rehearsals, running personal errands and were only available at the performance venue from 9 pm onwards. Even when I am able to see these Mak Nyah dancers perform on stage, I had to wait for a given time to interview them. This meant waiting for them to finish performing, a wait that could last four to five hours.

Since this study focuses on a highly sensitive group, I withhold information about the true identity of the nightclubs and informants under study to protect them.

Literature Review

The field of my research is dance, gender and sexuality. Sex refers to physical or physiological differences between males and females, including both primary sex characteristics (the reproductive system) and secondary characteristics such as height and muscularity. Gender is a term that refers to social or cultural distinctions associated with being male or female. According to Diamond (2002), gender identity is the extent to which one identifies as being either masculine or feminine.

Gender and sexuality have relevance in all aspects of social life and thus, sociological analysis: politics and power, cultural beliefs and values, social action, self and identity, and social structures. For example, the right of lesbians and gays to marry is not seen as a personal issue, or a question of individual rights, but rather as an issue of state scrutiny. Claims for such rights are indicative of wider social changes that potentially threaten or undermine essentialist beliefs and values and social structural arrangements associated with the traditional heterosexual gender order. Therefore, issues around sexuality and gender cannot be understood as merely personal and private since they raise key sociological questions about the connection between structure, culture, the self and identity and the operation of power across all these aspects of social life (Ortner & Whitehead, 1981). Religious authorities in Malaysia believe that gender and sexuality is determined at birth and that citizens should comply with laws on gender, hence, making it troublesome for individuals who do not follow the law.

Peletz (2009) mentions that, in the 1970s & 1980s, Malaysia exhibited tolerance and respect for the transgendered community. Even though the author has a fair share of writings in regards to Islam, and specifically, Mak Nyahs, in Malaysia, Peletz's thesis is contingent on his definition of gender pluralism. For Peletz (2009), this term

refers to pluralism in gendered fields or domains and denotes pluralistic sensibilities and dispositions regarding bodily practices, embodied desires, social roles, and sexual relationships (p. 10). Peletz argues that diversity, in the form of general values, norms and beliefs, is not granted legitimacy and, as such, does not constitute pluralism. Indeed, Peletz (2009) says, greater diversity may be perceived as a threat to governing bodies and thus contribute to a constriction of gender pluralism, as is arguably happening in Malaysia (p. 265). There are many cases where gender pluralism has actually increased over time (for example, in transgender fashion parades, gay and lesbian relationships, or women assuming new roles). As such, Peletz (2009) asks, “Why is gender pluralism still relatively robust in many Southeast Asian societies, despite the cultural, political, and historical forces long arrayed against it?” (p. 179). In countries such as Malaysia, Peletz (2009) continues, the government is frequently more punitive toward anti-government rhetoric than it is toward transgender rhetoric (p. 253). As such, the thesis that gender pluralism in Southeast Asia has constricted since early modern times needs constant qualification (Peletz, 2009, p. 569).

In Premalatha Thiagarajan’s (2012) dissertation, *Performing Indian Dance in Malaysia*, the author speaks about an interview with one of her informants, a celebrated transgendered Indian dance artist who was popular before her sex reassignment surgery (pp. 165-175). The author discusses mainly Indian male dancers, but she highlights political issues within the LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Intersex) community. I found the case study about the struggles of transsexual artist in Malaysia compelling and intended to expand the investigation by focusing on the Mak Nyah community and cabaret dance performers in nightclubs.

Transgendered women are known as a Hijra in South India, according to Gayatri Reddy (2005), who wrote *With Respect to Sex*. In one section of the book, the author

examines Hyper (In) Visibility of Hijras. The Mak Nyahs cabaret dancers are only visible in the nightclubs where they perform just like the Hijras who are only expected to be visible at certain circumscribed ritual occasions. Negative attention by the media and society have made Mak Nyahs and Hijras “invisible” as these transgendered women are not tolerated compared to ten or twenty years ago. Even though India is not a Muslim state, and laws such as Syariah law is not heavily imposed like in Malaysia, Hijras still face scrutinization from the Hyderabad community and struggle to gain respect from within their community and the public (Reddy, 2005, pp. 2-5). Reddy also speaks about the “performance” of femininity in the Hijra community. She says the more “hyper-feminine” a Hijra would look; the more respectable they are within their community. The economics of visibility through hyper-femininity and hyper-sexuality are useful theories for my study.

The anthology *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off The Stage* (2001) offered me with plenty of 21st century articles, case studies, and theories related to gender in dance for my research. Jane C. Desmond (2001) investigates the concept of “making the invisible visible” in the section of the same name (pp. 3-32). She explains how the stage is used in staging one’s gender and sexuality, and in her case studies, the “unspeakable”, “unnamable”, “unthinkable”, and non-normative sexualities. The author also mentions that the role of “queer” dance communities have been under recognized in dance history, just like the Mak Nyah cabaret dancers in my studies.

Mak Nyah cabaret dance steps are predominantly improvisations and do not follow a particular structure/syllabus such as Ballet dance (e.g. *chasse en avant* or feet positions or selected repertoires). However, Mak Nyah cabaret dancers do display certain effeminate gestures described by Gere (2001) such as imitating “moths

flying”, “catwalk like a model” with an exaggerated hip sway and displaying the dancers’ body curves by putting arms on hips. Susan Manning investigates queer gaze in her article, "Looking from a Different Place: Gay Spectatorship of American Modern Dance" (Manning, 2001, pp. 403-410). The author compares gay and lesbian spectatorship vs. straight spectatorship. Manning speaks about homophobic frame and homoerotic subtext and suggests that the bias or perception of one’s gaze is based on one’s personal bias or experience (whether the spectator is gay or not). I compare this observation in my case study of Club A, B and C with Club A and C being a predominantly hetero-normative nightclub, whereas Club B is a gay club. As my research is focused on the nightclub space, I found Chatterton and Robert’s (2003) book, *Urban Nightscapes* (pp. 148-161) extremely useful in my study of gay spaces. This book takes a new look at this rapidly changing aspect of urban life, examining the relationships between young adults, nightlife and city spaces. It focuses on what the authors call urban nightscapes - both mainstream and alternative youthful cultural activities in bars, pubs, nightclubs and music venues, which occur against a backdrop of increasing corporate influence in the night-time economy. In Chapter 7, the author discusses “invisible gays” as gay men and lesbian generally experience dominant mainstream nightlife spaces in urban “margins” or “fringe” just like Club B in my studies. The author also mentions the importance of making and re-making of the urban nightlife, which is a topic that is very useful for my research with the recent mushrooming of Mak Nyah cabaret in nightclubs compared to 10 or 20 years ago. This development allows me to understand why a nightclub needs to constantly innovate in order to appeal to their audiences and how the night space of today acts as a safe space, not only for the transgendered performers, but also for gay and “queer” guests. In the book, the author states “Two of the most fundamental influences on

nightlife over the last 30 years have been shifts in gender relations and the impact of gay and queer cultures.” (Chatterton, 2003, p. 148). Urban night communities play an important role economically as certain communities like the Mak Nyahs heavily rely on nightscapes for employment or jobs, like, streetwalkers and nightclub dancers.

In Qian Hui Tan’s (2014) article “Orientalist Obsessions: Fabricating hyper-reality and performing hyper-femininity in Thailand’s Kathoey Tourism”, the author investigates Kathoeys, or Male-to-Female transgendered women, in Thailand as they fabricate hyper-reality and performs hyper-femininity in order to draw tourist and manipulate tourist gaze in artful ways such as dance and performing arts. Susan Wolfe’s (2014) article, “The (In)visible Lesbian: Anxieties of Representation in the L Word”, she speaks about L, referring to lesbians as being invisible, which implies that the lesbians in her study often chooses to be invisible to mainstream public as they are not properly portrayed on the media and in television programs. For example, in 2012, Malaysian Mak Nyah and multi-millionaire businesswomen said in a TV1 interview, *Halalkah Aku?* (trans. *Am I Halal?*), that the society often see Mak Nyahs as street walkers and prostitutes, and do not see these people as capable of holding serious corporate jobs.

There are several different forms of spectator identification but I would base my research on books in film studies such as Laura Mulvey's (2011) *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Jean-Louis Baudry's (2011) *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematography Apparatus*, Teresa De Lauretis's (2011) *Desire in Narrative* and Christina Metz's (2011) *From The Imaginary Signifier: Loving the Cinema, Identification, Mirror, Disavowal, Fetishism*. The authors speaks on spectatorship as a complex but necessary part of film as different spectators are identified in different

ways, however, identification is necessary for spectator to create meaning and for film to exist.

In the book *Open Minds: The Social Making of Agency and Intentionality*, Prinz (2012) offers the novel claim that agency and intentionality are first perceived and understood in others, and that it is only through practices and discourses of social mirroring that individuals come to apply these features to themselves and to shape their architectures for volition and cognition accordingly. Cabaret dancing in the nightclubs that I have researched help audiences to understand the Mak Nyah community through social interaction and communication during the performances. This allows audiences that do not interact with Mak Nyah on a daily basis to understand and fundamentally open their minds to other minds or community.

Theoretical Framework

The discussion of this study is based on the theoretical framework of the economics of visibility in relations to space, spectatorship and agency.

I investigate the spectrum of invisibility and hypervisibility. Invisibility in the context of Mak Nyah cabaret dancers in Klang Valley refers to the state during which these Mak Nyahs are outside of the nightclub space or offstage. While outside of the nightclub space, these Mak Nyahs prefer dressing down in androgynous outfits or clothing with a combination of male and female characteristics, which makes their gender difficult to discern such as jeans and t-shirt. Also, outside of work, they usually wear minimal or no makeup, and are rarely seen being interviewed on television or in magazines. Lynn D. (pseudonym), a Mak Nyah dancer I interviewed, requested not to be filmed or have her voice recorded during the interview backstage after her show at Club A. When questioned further she mentioned that she didn't want

“unnecessary attention” for her and her family from religious authorities and friends and relatives who do not know of her transformation and night job.

Mak Nyah dancers through their hyperfeminine and hypersexual performances become a “spectacle,” the center of attraction, thus hypervisible. Hyperfemininity refers to the exaggerated behavior of the feminine gender. Mak Nyah dancers perform hyperfemininity, exemplified by their body-hugging dresses and push-up bras, their red lipstick and long, false eyelashes, and their exaggerated hip sways. Mak Nyah dancers also commonly portray hypersexuality in their audience interaction. For example, many of their dance acts include caressing customers’ faces and bodies, gyrating on the customers’ laps and encouraging the customer to touch their bodies or forcibly taking the customers’ hands and doing so.

These hyperfeminine and hypersexual performances appeal to the spectators and Mak Nyah dance performances constantly draw crowds. Due to the popularity of their dance shows, Mak Nyah dancers attain the capitalist power to demand a higher salary and choose their performance venue or employer, and attain the artistic power to decide their dance routines, songs, and attires.

Past scholarship tends to focus on male spectatorship. However, the role of female spectatorship is becoming increasingly important. Thus far, the spectator has been recognized as male. Baudry (2011) and Metz (2011) refer to the spectator as “he” in their writings. De Lauretis (2011) sets out to solve Mulvey’s problem or theory of the woman as an object. If the woman’s purpose in film is to be looked at, then how can a female spectator be an active viewer and identify with her likeness on the screen? De Lauretis says that the female spectator’s identification cannot alternate between both the subject/looker and object/image because then she becomes stuck in limbo between the two (p. 586). Instead, she abandons the differentiation between masculine and

feminine spectatorship because otherwise identification is always “entirely masculine” and not possible for a female to participate in (p. 587). However, as we have seen, the spectator must participate in some form of identification for the film to have meaning. According to Mulvey (2011), Mak Nyah performers are coded to ensure that they have strong visual and erotic impact, with large breasts, flawless skin, fully made-up faces, and tiny waists, which draw in “to be looked at ness” (p. 62). Mak Nyah employs racy body movements, exaggerated hips that sway from side to side and sexually suggestive facial expressions. Mulvey states that the role of a feminine character in a narrative, and in this case Mak Nyah cabaret dance performance, is to be an erotic object for the spectator in the cinema or nightclub (p. 62).

In the social sciences, agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own choices, as mentioned by Chris Barker in his book *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. In contrast, Barker (2005) states, structure is those factors of influence (such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, ability, customs, etc.) that determine or limit an agent and his or her decisions. One's agency is one's independent ability to act on one's will. This ability is affected by the cognitive belief structures that one has formed through one's experiences, and the perceptions held by the society and the individual, of the structures and circumstances of the environment one is in and the position they are born into. Disagreement on the limits of one's agency often creates conflict between different parties. In the study of Mak Nyah dancers, the conflict is between the media or government and the Mak Nyah community. Cabaret dancing and dancing at nightclubs are used as an agency from them to become something much more than themselves: an image of what they hope

to be, someone they feel most comfortable as, or simply an overt expression of their unique place in the society.

The structure explained above supports the theory of my research study and indicates that the theoretical framework of economics of visibility, spectatorship and agency are viable for my study on Mak Nyah cabaret performers in Klang Valley as these theories intertwines with one another when researching Mak Nyahs cabaret dancers in the nightclub spaces.

University of Malaya

CHAPTER 2: MAK NYAH IN LAW, RELIGION AND MEDIA

2.1 Malaysian Law, Religion and Media

Human Rights Watch, a human rights international organization that is non-profit and nongovernmental openly states that discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people is pervasive in Malaysia as LGBT rights are largely unrecognized in Malaysia. For example, under the British Empire Colonial Era Law or Civil Law in Malaysia, the act of sodomy is criminalized. Malaysia is a country with dual system of law. This is provided in Article 121(1A) of the Constitution of Malaysia. There is the *Civil Law* (Common Law) and the *Islamic Law*. Article 3 also states that Islamic law is a state law with the exception for three Federal Territories of Malaysia, namely, Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Labuan. Islamic law refers to Shari'ah law (Chevallier-Govers, 2010), and in Malaysia it is known and spelled as *Syariah*. The court is known as the *Syariah Court*. Looking at the Malaysian legal system as a whole, Syariah has a relatively small scope within defining the laws of the country. Numerous cases of others being affected with regards to Civil law, the Syariah courts has jurisdiction in personal law matters, for example marriage, inheritance, and apostasy. In certain states there are Syariah criminal laws. For example, there is the Kelantan Syariah Criminal Code Enactment 1993. In August 2007, the then Chief Justice of Malaysia proposed to replace the current common law application in Malaysia with Syariah law. Since then, Mak Nyahs had often been caught in never ending legal issues as within Syariah Law. Men dressing as women are strictly prohibited in Islam and other Muslim LGBT people are further persecuted in the Syariah court in addition to secular laws too.

Muslim men who want to be women are facing growing persecution by the religious authority. Cross-dressing is not technically a crime. However, transgendered

people have been arrested by police under civil laws governing "public indecency". Muslims may be further charged by religious officers under Syariah Laws for "impersonating" women. Seventy to eighty percent of 10,000 Mak Nyahs in Multi-Ethnic and Multi-Religious Malaysia are Muslims (Teh, 1998, p. 165).

Other than the law, Mak Nyahs and LGBT individuals are oppressed by the media, affected in politics, denied work in the navy and also or allowed to be depicted in films. For example, in 1994, the government banned anyone who is homosexual, bisexual or transsexual from appearing in the state-controlled media (Santiago, 2012). Then in 2001, former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, stated that the country will deport any visiting foreign cabinet ministers or diplomats who are gay while also warned gay ministers in foreign countries not to bring along their partners while visiting the nation ("Gay ministers barred, Malaysia tells UK," 2001). This was an ironic situation as Mahathir's daughter, Marina Mahathir, had three years prior called for an end to discrimination based on sexual orientation ("PM's daughter slams Malaysian anti-gay group," 1998). In 2005, the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) chief Mohd Anwar Mohd Nor stated that the Navy would never accept homosexuals ("No Homosexuals in Malaysian Navy, Says Chief," 2005). Most recently in 2017, Malaysia tried to censor *Beauty and the Beast* over some gay moments but eventually caved in to public pressure and let the movie be shown ("Beauty and the Beast release postponed in Malaysia," 2017).

Society does not realize that there's a difference between sex, the physical genitalia, which a human is born with, and gender, the identity which one associate themselves to, hence, many non-heteronormative individuals are often ostracized. Gender theorist Judith Butler (1999) in her book *Gender Trouble* states that the government, society, and employers often use gender dysphoria to deny one from

employment (p. 214). Gender dysphoria involves a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he or she identify. People with gender dysphoria may be uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth, for example male or female, uncomfortable with the appearance of their physical body or being uncomfortable with the expected roles of their assigned gender. "Gender dysphoria can be used in many countries still to deny employment or to take away one's child." For example, LGBT people and in my studies, the Mak Nyahs are often ostracized and denied jobs due to how they look. Because of this, they are forced to take up lowly paid and derogatory jobs such as prostitution and factory worker in order to make a living. The increase of Islamization in the 1980s and also the "Asian Values" propaganda by the government has further shunned these Mak Nyah individuals.

To avoid the public eye, Mak Nyah artists would often have secret, unpublicized and underground performances or shows within their communities in enclosed spaces such as nightclubs in Klang Valley and in areas such as the Bukit Bintang (Azizan, 2011). Mak Nyah performers usually performs at private events such as birthdays, weddings and corporate functions and also double up as makeup artist (Mak Andam), and cooks, and in a recent case on April 3rd, 2016, the Malaysian transgender community who hosted and held a dinner and beauty contest for the trans women community were raided by Malaysian religious authorities. The Federal Territories Islamic Department (JAWI) on 3rd of April gatecrashed the closed-door dinner event without police personnel accompanying them on the grounds that it violated a fatwa against beauty pageants that were gazetted for the Muslim women under the Administration of Islamic Law (Federal Territories) Act in February 1996.

Ten JAWI officers, together with the media, came to the hotel at about 10pm on 3rd of April and prevented people from leaving the dinner that had about 200 transgender guests. The transgendered organizer, Ira Sophia, and lawyer-turned activist, Siti Kasim, were arrested later while the rest of the guest were let go. During the ordeal, Siti Kasim requested to see a warrant but the JAWI officers were not able to produce any warrant. Lawyer and activist, Siti Kasim, who had attended the closed-door function at one of the hotel in Kuala Lumpur were apprehended by the religious authorities, and they have also detained the event's transgender event organizer. The transgender woman who purportedly organized a beauty pageant may be charged with encouraging vice and defying religious authorities, while Siti Kasim was charged for obstructing the duties of a public servant but was on bail after.

In an interview with Malay Mail Online on 5th of April 2016, Siti mentioned that the officers informed her that it is against the law to hold a beauty contest as it is haram in Malaysia, based on Fatwa, however, these Laws do not apply to these Mak Nyahs (transgender women) were simply having dinner and doing a charity show and fake beauty pageant were each of them are imaginarily representing a country of their choice.

According to Siti Kasim in the article, JAWI officer said the department was there as they had received a complaint about the illegal "Beauty Contest," but she stressed that the event was only a show meant to raise funds for charity for the local marginalized communities in Kuala Lumpur.

When the ban on sex reassignment surgery (SRS) was first introduced in 1983 by the National Fatwa Council of Malaysia, a fatwa (religious ruling) was issued (Shogo, 2017). Many Malaysian Mak Nyahs then decided to flock to neighbouring Thailand for SRS and also due to cheaper surgery cost there. From there, Mak Nyahs embraced

Thai Kathoey's culture of Cabaret and Pageantry. Malay Mak Nyahs also have similar South East Asian facial and physical appearance as Thai Kathoey, such as bigger eyes, olive skin, petite physique compared to westerners and sharp facial bone structure, hence, making it easy for them to embrace the same look and feel as Thai Cabaret performers. Hence, multiple visits to Thailand for sex reassignment surgeries resulted in Malaysian Mak Nyah embracing the Thailand Kathoey's Way of Life.

According to activist Kartini Slamah's (2005) article *The Struggle to be Ourselves, Neither Men Nor Women: Mak Nyahs in Malaysia*, the championing of Mak Nyah rights and providing these Mak Nyahs visibility or voice is a double-edged sword. If LGBT groups such as the PT Foundation are too vocal in advocating these Mak Nyah rights, it might negatively impact Mak Nyahs as being visible in general would spur the police and religious anti-vice squad to carry out raids and further push these Mak Nyahs underground. This would make the Mak Nyahs even more invisible and difficult to reach and as a result, more vulnerable to health and rights violations (p. 108).

Slamah's (2005) championing of Mak Nyah rights and dialogue sessions between the Mak Nyah community, police headquarters, religious authorities and social welfare departments have led to some changes, such as Mak Nyahs experiencing less guilt and shame when lodging police complaints as they are more empowered of their rights. It is important for the Mak Nyah community to claim emerging spaces in Malaysian society to gain visibility as visibility leads to acceptance (p. 109).

Mak Nyah cabaret dancers in Klang Valley play a part in creating visibility for their community through cabaret dancing. Hence, they use the cabaret dance form, their role as hired dancers and also the nightclub space as an agency to be visible and to choose how they live their life in their own terms and free will. For example, they

have the free will to choose to perform in nightclubs with a higher wage instead of being exploited by nightclubs to perform for a lower wage and they have creative freedom to choose songs, costumes and choreography that they will perform for nightclub audiences.

The Mak Nyah dance cabaret performance is popular and in demand in nightclubs at Klang Valley. Spectators are given a live performance where they interact with the Mak Nyah dancers directly, by going up on stage and dancing with these dancers or indirectly, by cheering and clapping after each performance. Basically, the energy from these spectators is what fuels the performances and the positive experience of the spectators oftentimes make these spectators come back for more.

These Mak Nyah dancers are oppressed by society and are often harassed by the police and religious officer when in public. For example, Mak Nyahs are often arrested for dressing in feminine clothing and while in police custody, they are forced to strip naked and are sexually violated. However, they are not protected by the law and are unable to access the law to report violations such as rape as the law only recognizes sexual attacks on a biological female person by a biological male person. (Slamah, 2005, pp. 102-103).

These nightclub spaces are somewhat a safe haven and safe space for these Mak Nyahs to perform as nightclub owners often hire nightclub bouncers to protect these Mak Nyah dancers from being harassed by customers while performing. Also, these nightclub owners are often well connected and thus, have a network of informants to inform these nightclubs if there would be police or religious authority raids that would be going on.

In the next chapter, we will look at the history of cabaret in Malaysia, the cabaret dance form and also analysis of Mak Nyah cabaret dance at three nightclubs in Klang Valley, Clubs A, B and C.

University of Malaya

CHAPTER 3: CABARET IN MALAYSIA

3.1 Cabaret Dance

In this chapter, I will look at the cabaret dance, the origins of the cabaret, how cabaret was introduced to Malaya in Post World War 2, Malaysia's cabaret queen the late Rose Chan and also my research findings at Club A, B and C. Cabaret dancing is a type of dance that shares facets of other performing arts such as comedy, variety, circus, burlesque, live art, theatre, dance, clubbing and even cinema. In addition to the movements that cabaret dancers typically perform, which includes choreographed synchronized kicks, graceful hand motions and turns, plus a lot of hip work, a cabaret dance does not follow an exact syllabus like ballet and constantly evolves and draws inspiration from current and past popular culture. For example, the song Vogue was popular in the 1990s. Hence, the vogue dance step was incorporated into many cabaret dance routines of the era. Beyonce's "Single Ladies" is another popular song. Hence, the music video's iconic hand twist was incorporated into dances and the popular 1979 hit YMCA's cheer leading gestures and the hand miming of the words Y, M, C and A is used when they dance to the song. Cabaret dance is transgressive, upending everyday ideas about art and bodies, politics and sex, provoking as well as pleasing.

Cabaret dance is the most theatrical of all the dance styles. Other than the exaggerated costumes that cabaret dancers wear, which are visually identifiable as cabaret dance costumes, cabaret dancers, who are usually women are required to dance in a light, agile yet flexible manner, as they do a lot of spins, kicks and sometimes jumps. Cabaret dancers must also have terrific stamina, because cabaret dances run with high intensity for about three-and-a-half minutes, which is about the

length of a song. Most dance styles showcase dancers being lost in the dance. However, for cabaret dances, the audience's laughter, squirms, gasps and claps are elements that make the cabaret dance what it is.

There's no fourth wall here. Fourth wall is the term and performance convention in which an invisible or imagined wall separates the performer from the audience. (Bell, 2008, p. 208) Even though audiences would be able to see through this make-belief "wall", the convention assumes that the performers act as if they cannot see the audience just like actors that appear on one's television set. The fourth wall concept was developed from the 16th century due to the rise of illusionism in staging practices that culminates in the realism and naturalism of the 19th century theatre. (Wallis, 1998, p. 214) Cabaret dance performers however, can see and hear you and will let you know it. The word 'cabaret' means 'room' and what happens in a show depends on the dynamic between the performer and the audience in that place on that night. Unlike other dance styles, the energy from the crowd is crucial in cabaret. This is because, however talented, a cabaret artist is not merely a performer but the leader of a collaboration between the dancers and audiences.

3.2 Origins of the Cabaret

The French word 'cabaret' evolved from the term *camberete*, which essentially means a chamber or small room, but the modern usage of the term developed in the 1880s in Paris as the word cabaret came to mean "a restaurant or nightclub" by 1912. Cabaret is a form of entertainment featuring music, song, dance, drama and sometimes comedy. The performance venue, varies between a restaurant or nightclub with a stage for performances with the audience sitting at tables, often dining or drinking. Cabaret style venue layout mainly has tables and seating for a staged event.

It consists of round tables arranged throughout the venue, allowing attendees a clear view of the presentation.

The Cabaret first appeared at the beginning of the late 19th-century Paris. Cabarets were liquor clubs where avant-garde poets, artists, and composers would swap concepts and act out their ideas. From Paris, cabaret travelled across Europe to Madrid, Vienna, Zurich and Budapest. In Britain, cabaret was combined with music halls and variety shows. When it arrived in America, it fused with vaudeville and found popularity in the speakeasies of the Prohibition era. The art form has always been a combination of the playful and those who are politically assertive. Christopher Isherwood's 1930s' novelized memoir "Goodbye to Berlin", which the popular Broadway musical and film Cabaret were based, the author describes visiting a space Salomé in which he was a spectator of a drag queen dressed in a over the top outfits while performing and doing the splits three times (Chu, 2011).

Cabaret throughout the years has always been as much about unorthodox culture as political nonconformity. Mak Nyah dance cabaret provides a form of escapism for its viewers as audiences are tantalized with giant feathered fans of the Mak Nyah in high heels who offers a splash of exotic glamour. Mak Nyah cabaret dance is a celebration of oddity and the liberated imagination. It is a way to deliver a message about one's politics or one's beliefs to an audience.

In her article, *Anthropology of Dance*, Adrienne Kaeppler defines dance as "a cultural form that results from creative processes which manipulate human bodies in time and space. The cultural form produced, though transient, has structured content, is a visual manifestation of social relations, and may be the subject of an elaborate aesthetic system" (Kaeppler, 1978, pg.32). According to Kaeppler, dance is defined as such based on the point of view of the beholder as when comparing dances from one

culture to another, dance characteristics such as movement, patterns, styles, dynamics and value are distinguished. Kaeppler mentions Franz Boas, who refers to analyzing dance “in terms of one’s own culture rather than as a universal language.”

To understand the Mak Nyah society and its culture, one of the aspects is to study Mak Nyah cabaret dance. Certain features of a particular society can be analyzed through the steps involved, the structure or positioning of the dancers, the roles of the dancers, the costumes, and the content of the dance. For example, by observing the methods of movement in Mak Nyah dance cabaret, we are able to have an idea of the gender roles and expectations of a society. In the Mak Nyah dance cabaret, the dancers move voyeuristically and in a sexual manner, playing up on their femininity. There is also a lot of focus on the movement of the hips and shape of their arms, further demonstrating their feminine figure. As the main spenders at nightclubs are usually men, the Mak Nyah dancer performs to attract men as the gestures and choreographies are shown where the feminine figure is thought to be an object that is of sexualised feminine beauty instead of barbaric masculinity.

Mak Nyah dance cabaret can also be looked at from a structural functionalist aspect. For example, the Mak Nyah dance cabaret has a functional role in providing the Mak Nyahs with a platform to channel and direct their expressions of emotions such as hope, frustration and distress to their audience. This provides us with a deeper and fuller understanding of their society from their point of view. Through looking at the formation of the Mak Nyah cabaret dance, issues regarding power-relations, authority, agency and spectatorship becomes more explicit. Mak Nyah cabaret dance is used as a way for a section of the Mak Nyah community to express and demonstrate empowerment within these enclosed nightclub spaces and break away from those in authority such as the police and religious authorities. Thus, through the

Mak Nyah dance cabaret, the disempowered and in this case the Mak Nyah dancers, are provided with an avenue of empowerment from the strict Malaysian laws and prejudiced society.

In popular culture, cabaret dance is distinguished mainly by the outfit choice which includes feathery or sparkling headpieces, feminine and form fitting dresses. These dancers often wear high heel shoes while dancing and have graceful movement which predominantly uses gestures of arms and above the waist.

The commercialization of Mak Nyah cabaret dance through the nightclub spaces has the ability to transform society as being part of the audience, the participant-spectator-observer relationship allows the society or audiences to have a closer look at these individuals. Cabaret is an outlet for creativity as much as an agency for the communication of political principles, where outsiders can understand the culture of the community that supports, funds and performs the cabaret dance.

The tradition of the Mak Nyah cabaret dance is not solely developed by these Mak Nyahs but ideas derived from the West. Current day Malaysian Mak Nyahs and the late Malaysian cabaret queen Rose Chan also drew outfit and dance inspiration from American films as well as other dance classics such as the Ziegfeld Follies dancers.

“Whenever she had the chance, she watched early Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films as well as other dance classics like “Waltzes from Vienna” and Ziegfeld and copied the moves” (Rajendra, 2013, p. 130).

Inspiration of dance choreographies are inspired by famous cabaret dance shows such as the American Ziegfeld Follies dancers from the 1930s and Thailand Kathoey’s Tiffany and Alcazar cabaret shows. These shows were often performed on

stages with expensive setups and elaborated background designs. These dancers were tall, attractive, and had a slim proportionate body and were seen performing in groups and danced using mainly their arms and upper body. These dancers are notable for using dance movements such as outstretched arms, arms on waist and the shimmy while parading exquisite outfits on stage. Mak Nyah cabarets also copies similar elements with the Zeigfeld Follies and Kathoey Cabarets such as the parading of ethnic costumes (for example, Indian or Dutch) with occasional appearance of male dancers.

3.3 Cabaret Influence In Post World War 2 Malaya (1946-1970)

Post World War 2 Malaya saw the emergence of amusement parks. Popular Amusement parks were Kuala Lumpur's BB Park, located in the Bukit Bintang area, Jubilee Park in Ipoh, Perak, New World Park in Penang, and Great World Park in Singapore. These amusement parks were popular hangout spots for single men, couples, and friends looking for some after-dinner entertainment as these amusement parks provided a wide array of entertainment such as cinemas and dance halls. These dance halls were also referred to as Cabarets. Cabarets opened after 8pm and went on until past midnight behind closed doors.



Figure 3.1: Guest performance by overseas Cabaret stars (Foo, 2017)

In the past, these venues also occasionally held dance competitions and featured overseas singers from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Refer to Figure 3.1. Cabarets were opened to families and small children during festive periods such as Chinese New Year and Christmas with additional performances featuring comedians, jugglers, contortionists, and acrobats. Table settings were also similar to today's nightclub setting. At the entrance, one would find booths or small tables flanked by “jagas” (guards or bouncers), once a customer enters, he or she would be able to choose a seat at any table in front of the stage and then proceeds to wait for the show to start (Rajendra, 2013, p. 113). The show would begin at approximately 10pm. At the entrance, cabaret nightclub goers pay entrance fee that entitles them for two free drinks and dancing tickets at the main door.

Malaya, which consisted of current day Peninsular Malaysia, and Singapore became the centre of all popular culture due to its importance as a trading and political centre for the British government after the 2nd World War. The economic prosperity accrued from the Korean War bolstered the post-WWII getai scene (Kwok-bun & Sai-shing, 2005). Prices for rubber and tin, the two mainstays of Malayan economy,

skyrocketed due to the surging demand for strategic materials. More importantly, 'real' wages for labourers in tin mines and rubber estates rose exponentially, with the daily wage jumping from a dollar and forty cents in 1950 to four dollars and thirty cents in 1951 (Stubbs, 1989, pp. 107-111). The improved economy not only weakened ongoing labour agitation, but also spurred a demand for leisure activities (Turnbull, 2009, pp. 236-237). Meanwhile, developments in communications technology and the mobilization of popular culture for social critique fostered a flourishing, urban entertainment scene (Harper, 2001, pp. 283 & 291).

Unlike vaudeville¹, which welcomed women and children to a family atmosphere, the cabaret satiated sexual fantasies and desires of adult men and women during their leisure time. Women and men could stretch the night into hours of pleasure for themselves, away from home, business, children, and other commitments for their own mutual enjoyment and leisure (Erenberg, 1991, p. 114).

Within these nightclubs were women working as hostesses and they were known as 'taxi dancers' or 'lancing girls'. Patrons are required to purchase tickets to dance with these hostesses who are trained in western dances such as A-go-go, Cha-Cha, Jive, Foxtrot, Twist, Rock & Roll and also local Malaysian dances such as Joget and Ronggeng. (Rajendra, 2013, p. 118) Popular cabaret performers from the 1940s to the 1970s were Rose Chan, Annie Cheah, Rose Marly (Rajendra, 2013, p. 205) and Barbara Tan.

¹ Vaudeville performances were also popular in Malaya in the 1950s-1960s (Foo, 2017).

3.4 Rose Chan: Malaysia's Cabaret Queen (1940s-1970s)

The late Rose Chan or Chang Wai Chan was the star dancer at these amusement park venues and is known as Malaysia's Cabaret Queen from the 1940s till the 1970s. Her life has been depicted in books such as Cecil Rajendra's (2013) *No Bed of Roses*, a live musical entitled *Rose, Rose I Love You* performed in Genting Highlands in 2007, and there's even talks of a film of her life to be produced by a Singaporean director, Eric Khoo.



Figure 3.2: News article on Rose Chan in the Week-End Annual (“The Most Talked About Girl in Malaya,” 1956)

Figure 3.2 is a newspaper article taken from The Week-End Annual newspaper dated December 1956. It featured Rose Chan, Malaya's first striptease. According to the article, Rose Chan had an early life where she struggled against hunger and poverty even during her days as a cabaret girl from 1943 till 1952 when her bra accidentally snapped at a performance in the Majestic Theatre in Ipoh. Rose Chan is known for her philanthropic ways as she's often found donating a considerable amount of money to the poor, sick, and unemployed. In the article, she also said that

life as a striptease dancer was not easy as she had to practice her moves and choreography for hours to be perfect and think up something new for audience.



Figure 3.3: Rose Chan's Chean Hoong Revue Publicity Poster

Apart from those cabarets performed at the World amusement parks owned by the Shaw Brothers such as New World and Great World, cabaret dance troupes go on tours with their mobile travelling cabarets troupes called the “mobile getai [流□歌台]”. Getai means “song stage” in Mandarin. Getai troupes of entertainers such as *Rose Chan Chean Hong Revue* in Figure 3.3 travelled from place to place to perform. Most dance troupes followed the “Shaw circuit”, meaning they were contracted to perform across the string of Shaw Brothers-owned amusement parks and theatres in Singapore and Malaya (Kong, 2008, pp. 34-35).

Cabaret “getai” or “yanwutuan” troupes travelled to towns, connected by railway such as Singapore, Johore, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, and all the way up north to Penang. They entertained locals, traders, Chinese tin miners, and British soldiers, who set up the base in Malaya during the British colonial rule in Malaya. Later, they entertained Japanese soldiers when Japan invaded Malaya. They also performed for the American

sailors, who docked at Malaya while in transit to Vietnam during the Vietnam War (Wong & Tan, 2004, pp. 293-294).



Figure 3.4: Rose Chan’s Publicity Poster for her overseas gig

Figure 3.4 also shows Rose Chan’s publicity poster for her overseas act in Australia proving that these dance troupes had a lot of mobility during the 1950s. For twelve weeks from the end of August 1958, Laurie Smith, the producer-manager of Brisbane’s Theatre Royal (Bollen, 2011), sought to attract an audience for the very first Australian appearance of Rose Chan:

“Announcement Extraordinary! Opening Saturday October 4th – Imported from Manila – Exclusively by this theatre – the hottest thing in the East – A New Entertainment Experience – Rose Chan – Strip-Tease Extraordinary – Malaya’s Gypsy Rose Lee – You’ll never see anything like this again in your life!” (Peepshow Scandals, Theatre Royal, Brisbane, 6 Sep 1958).

Despite being extremely popular from the 1950s till 1960s, there were several reasons for the decline of cabaret shows in Malaya (Md. Nor, 2003; van der Putten, 2014). New World Park faded from the night scene after the 1960s, a fate that also

affected the other amusement parks in Malaya. The decline of amusement parks was also due to the availability of alternative entertainment options such as radios, television sets, shopping centres, modern discos and nightclubs (Rudolph, 1996, p. 21). Hence, cabaret dancers started to look for alternative jobs (“Cabaret girls now work in bars as well to make extra money,” 1960) while travelling cabaret getai troupes moved north towards Penang and Thailand.

Getai are traditionally performed in Mandarin, Cantonese and Hokkien Chinese dialects and there are big populations of Hokkien Chinese in Singapore, Penang, Alor Setar and Thailand.² Thailand is home to the largest overseas Chinese community in the world.³

In the past, getais were performed nightly. But today, they are performed during special events such as the Chinese traditional “Hungry Ghost Festival” or competitions within the getai community.⁴

As getai in Thailand started to gain popularity, especially within the Chinese communities in South Thailand, I speculate that getai troupes were the inspiration for the Kathoey cabarets due to the similarity in costumes of getai performers and early Kathoey cabaret show performers. It is common to find getai performers perform in both heteronormative and non-heteronormative clothing such as a ballerina tutu over a tuxedo. It should be noted that the first Tiffany Show performance was at a small bar in Pattaya, Thailand, in 1974. A man dressed in both male and female costumes

² Foreigners invade getai, The Straits Times, Aug 23, 2009

³ October 20, 2015, Star2, StarOnline, Give up meat and sex for Thai festival ‘ticket to heaven’

<http://www.star2.com/food/food-news/2015/10/20/give-up-meat-and-sex-for-thai-festival-ticket-to-heaven/#jUMfKpZLuVEPe0R6.99>

⁴ *Who’s afraid of getai?* 5 May 2015, May Seah, <https://www.pressreader.com/singapore/today/20150505/281852937129671>

performed it. This was probably inspired by the Getai performances within the Thai-Chinese communities in Thailand then. The Tiffany Cabaret show claims to be the first and longest-running Transvestite Cabaret show from 1974 until today.⁵

When the ban on sex reassignment surgery (SRS) was first introduced in 1983 by the National Fatwa Council of Malaysia, a fatwa (religious ruling) was imposed⁶. Many Malaysian Mak Nyahs then decided to flock to neighboring Thailand for SRS and also due to cheaper surgery cost. From there, Mak Nyahs embraced Thai Kathoey's culture of cabaret and pageantry with a twist of western showgirls costumes ala Ziegfeld Follies. Since Malay Mak Nyahs have similar Southeast Asian facial and physical appearance as Thai Kathoey (third gender group in Thailand) such as big eyes, olive skin, petite physique and sharp facial bone structure, it was easy for them to embrace the Thai Cabaret performance culture.

Mak Nyah cabaret performers variously call themselves showgirls, paper dolls⁷, and divas. They are versatile because they perform in several nightclubs in Klang Valley. This highlights their artistic mobility. Cabaret dance is distinguished mainly by dance steps such as the usage of mostly their upper body and arms. They perform kicks, twirls and spins. While dancing, they are often seen with their arms placed on their waist as a form of feminine gesture and to highlight their small waist. They also perform graceful catwalks on stage while parading their feminine clothing such as high heel shoes, feathery/sparkling headpieces, feminine and form fitting evening gowns and dresses. These Mak Nyah dancers train five days a week to perfect their

⁵ Information retrieved on Tiffany Show Website. <http://www.tiffany-show.co.th/legend.html>

⁶ Information taken from New Mandala website, a website on new perspective of Southeast Asia hosted by the Australian National University. <http://www.newmandala.org/tackling-sex-re-assignment-surgery-malaysia/>

⁷ Amy Tashiana, a Singaporean transgendered cabaret icon mentions in a interview, that Paper Doll refers to the act of imitating celebrities, like dressing up a doll. <http://www.mackerel.life/becca-dbus-larger-than-life-story//737saucplk4fckkbue2ghaebxwcahk>

feminine dance steps and gestures. The performance venue varies between a restaurant or a nightclub with a stage for performances and with the audience seated at tables, often dining or drinking. Cabaret style venue layout mainly has tables and seating for a staged event. It consists of round tables arranged throughout the venue, allowing attendees a clear view of the presentation.

Throughout my fieldwork, it is interesting to note that the Mak Nyah dancers I interviewed said that they chose to be dancers because of their passion and love for music, dance and performance. All three commercial Mak Nyah dance groups and Mak Nyah nightclubs in Klang Valley showcase “showgirl” or “cabaret” style dances. Hence, one profound and important question that I had was that if one “loves” or is extremely passionate about dancing, why not perform other dance genres such as hip hop or breakdancing or tap dancing? Why do these Mak Nyah dancers wear five or six inches high heeled shoes when performing when professional competitive Latin dancers are only required to wear high heeled dance shoes that are only up to 3.5 inches (for safety reasons to avoid injuries when dancing). This dawned to me that Mak Nyahs and effeminate dancers prefer a certain type of dance or genre to make them hypervisible and allow them to showcase their hyperfemininity. Mak Nyah cabaret dancers usually perform with heavy make up, long flowy wigs or exaggerated beauty pageant hair buns, feathers or crowns as headpieces, slim gown/leotard/mini dress that “hugs” their figures and which exposes part of their bosoms or slim waists and a minimum of five inch high heels to create the illusion of long and slim legs.

This resonates with one of the subjects Thiagarajan (2012) mentions in her thesis, an Indian Classical Dance practitioner was quoted saying that (p. 164-165) those who were effeminate men tend to gravitate towards Indian classical dance since they were attracted to the possibility of being able to “dress up” for performances (Thiagarajan,

2012, 155-187). To illustrate this point more clearly, the following case study expresses the implications a transgendered person meet or face through the act of “voicing” and “coming out” publicly.”

My informant, Lynn D. (pseudonym) is the leader of FK Divas, a Mak Nyah dance group who are the most active as they have more frequent weekly shows compared to other Mak Nyah groups. I first met her at FBB nightclub while doing my preliminary research. My female companions who escorted me for my research and I were completely entranced by Lynn as she reminded us of a famous China actress named Fan Bing Bing. Born in 1988, this 29-year-old Mak Nyah performer had been a dancer with FK Divas for 10 years, Lynn mentions that there are three Mak Nyah dance group in Klang Valley. They have rehearsals for new song numbers or dance routines at least five days a week, to keep their performances up-to-date. Mak Nyah dancers usually dance to Shanghai jazz, traditional ethnic songs, theme songs from movies, and also popular modern music such as Handbag Music. Handbag music is a type of music in the house genre. Handbag house music consists of the obligatory disco music from divas such as Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston, simple four-on-the-floor TR-909 kick drums, hi-hats on the upbeats, Basic synth stabs in a minor key, and sometimes a snare on beats two and four. Its name comes from the phenomenon of a group of women dancing around a pile of handbags when in nightclubs.

Handbag (colloquial British slang for ‘uplifting,’ ‘girly’ remixes of Top 40 songs and similar nightclub material) is frequently derided within nightclub culture for being predictable, formulaic, and ‘commercial.’ However, the same music is hugely popular within gay male nightclubs. Significantly, handbag tends to retain clear song structures, as opposed to the more open-ended instrumental ‘tracks’, which are the norm in electronic dance music. The pleasures of handbag can be better understood if

we pay attention to the ways that ‘songs’ (rather than instrumental ‘tracks’) have always played an important role in nightclub music. By interrogating the music itself, the thesis also explores the ways in which musical conventions can be deployed to arouse desire on the dance floor and the reasons that these musical strategies are particularly useful in gay nightclubs.

Eight nightclubs in Klang Valley offers Mak Nyah cabaret performances. Four of these nightclubs are prohibition-era themed hidden speakeasy nightclubs, whereas the other remaining four nightclubs have politically and legally well-connected employers to protect their outlets from authorities in events of raids.

As mentioned previously, I investigate Mak Nyah cabaret dancers in three nightclubs in Klang Valley. Club A is a nightclub catered to elites such as royalties, business tycoons, celebrities and white collared professionals. Club B is a gay nightclub with middle-class patrons and Club C is a nightclub catered for middle-aged and middle-classed tourist and local men.

3.5 Club A

The dancers at Club A are mesmerizing and one would observe these women slowly swivel their hips back and forth as they step from side to side, dressed in elaborate and glamorous cabaret style outfits.

Club A has Mak Nyah dance cabaret shows on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays at 10pm onwards. The performers will usually perform three sets a night which is equivalent with three or four dance numbers or songs per set and each set lasts between 15 to 20 minutes.

The audiences and customers are ultra high network and drink prices are very expensive. The drinks are priced at a minimum RM50 per glass for a cocktail and a

bottle of hard liquor ranges from RM200 to RM3000. Club A imposes a minimum spent per table of RM3000 and the stage/performance area is closed for VIPs and those who are registered members. Membership starts at RM10,000. Customers at the public area cannot view performances which are performed in an enclosed area.

Club A has an old 1930s Shanghai theme and ambiance with waiters and waitresses wearing the Chinese traditional "Sam fu". Hostesses can also be seen dressed in cheongsam or qipao sitting on swings while greeting customers who walk into the nightclub.

During the Mak Nyah cabaret performance, though all eyes are glued towards the performers, the male customers can be seen squirming as the Mak Nyah performers move closer to dance and playfully touch them. The Mak Nyah dancers are also often seen sitting and gyrating on male customers laps and encouraging males customers to caress and touch their bodies. The stage is reasonably small, and per routine (per song), there's only a maximum of four dancers. Three on the dance floor and one up on stage, there can be no more than two dancers up on stage as the stage already has music equipments such as drums, speakers, microphone stands, keyboard, hence, making it difficult to have too many dancers on stage as there are not enough stage.

The audiences in Club A is generally more reserve in their reaction and not as rowdy as the other two clubs I investigate.

3.6 Club B

Club B is the longest running gay nightclub in Kuala Lumpur and has been in business for the past 20 years. Club B offers Mak Nyah Cabaret shows or known as "Paper Doll Performance" every Friday and Saturday nights from 11pm onwards. Unlike Club A and Club C, performers at Club B do not perform in multiple "sets"

with intermissions in between but perform back-to-back for 1-1 ½ hours, depending on the number of performers that night.

Patrons of this nightclub are mainly middle-class gay men who are below 40-years-old. There is no dress code to enter this nightclub but there is a cover charge of RM50 to enter this nightclub. The RM50 entrance fee entitles customers to two complimentary drinks. Subsequent drink orders are below RM30 per bottle or glass.

The interior of the nightclub looks more outdated and worn out compared to Club A. Customers can choose to seat or stand wherever they want unlike Club A where customers are ushered to division of seats depending on how much they spend that night.

Performances at Club B are not properly coordinated and it seems more like an "Open Mic" performance where almost any nightclub members who are transgendered or are cross-dressers can sign up to participate and perform a dance, song, or stand up comedy number. The dance routines are usually not properly rehearsed as there are different performers every day and these performances are seen as an outlet for their customers to perform "voluntarily". Dancers are not paid to perform at Club B whereas dancers in Club A and C are paid salary to perform.

Performances at Club B that are funny and entertaining but majority are poorly choreographed with cheap looking costumes, makeup, and hairdo. It is also noticed that some performers forget their dance routines and lyrics to the songs they are supposed to "mime". Audiences can immediately spot bad performances and associate those with dancers not being professional and lack of training. This could be largely due to hosting different performers or different dance routines every week.

Mak Nyah performers are expected to be in their "best" form and "perfect" in every way. These Mak Nyah dancers are often known for looking "perfect", hence,

when the image of the “perfect” Mak Nyah is not performed, their own LGBTI community often looks down on them. This is ironic as it seems as though these Mak Nyah dancers are required to put in more effort to impress their “own kind” rather than receiving support and encouragement from their community members.

3.7 Club C

Tucked into a dark corner of the sprawling Kuala Lumpur city center sits a very unassuming bar. As darkness falls, this popular nightclub located near Malaysia’s biggest tourist landmark comes alive as tourists, shoppers and diners look for alternative night entertainment nearby.

Club C has been a popular nightclub site amongst middle-class and middle-aged local Malaysian men and also tourists visiting the country for the past 20 years. Other than having live bands performances, Club C also has Mak Nyah cabaret performances every Tuesday at 10pm. The performers perform two sets of dances. The dance style performed here is similar to the dance performances at Club A as the same Mak Nyah dance group performs here.

Customers have an option to pay a cover charge of RM50, inclusive of one drink at the entrance, or purchase a bottle of hard liquor (which includes entrance of four customers) at the minimum price of RM200.

Club C’s goers are mainly heterosexual men in their late 40s to 60s. Audiences are very supportive of the performance and performers. They can often be seen positively cheering, giving wolf whistles, and clapping during and after each performance. Customers are also more sportive and allow Mak Nyah dancers to touch them, presenting relatively a different scenario compared to Club A, where customers are shy and reserved. The dance routine is similar to Club A as the same dance group

performs here. However, they only perform to two dance sets (with each set consisting of 15 minutes performance) compared to three dance sets at Club A. Similar to Club A, these dancers are seen interacting and mingling with the crowd during their performance using hypersexual gestures such as allowing the customers to touch their breast and buttocks.

Club C's manager, Kumar (pseudonym), did not allow me to take any pictures or videos in order to protect his customers, who were mostly married men looking for some entertainment. Here, prostitutes who are soliciting clients could be seen walking freely from table to table seeking clients.

FK Divas who performs at Club A and C, classifies themselves as good quality Mak Nyah dancers while avoids dancing at lower end night clubs such as Club B as only 'bad quality' dancers performs there.

In order to display a perfect act of femininity, a Mak Nyah dancers always needs to maintain her feminine poise, such as balance to ensures that no slippages or lost of feminine poise occurs. These traits is highly valued not only by the dancers but also by the Mak Nyah community. Only at Club B behaviors such as comedic display of masculinity and characteristics associated with uncouth and loud-mouthed performers are performed. As I will mention later in this chapter, instances of bad quality or exaggerated display of femininity includes inappropriate hairstyles and costumes, over-the-top hip-swaying during the catwalk and other exaggerations in mimicking femininity.

Whenever performers engaged in such excesses, that is, extreme and exaggerated performances on-stage, they usually invoked exclamations of shock followed by a series of laughter, and ultimately rejection from the audience.

3.8 Appropriate Display of Femininity Versus Exaggerated Display of Femininity

The Mak Nyah cabaret is not just a performance but also a spectacle for club goers, a spectacle of femininity on display. To full time and professional Mak Nyah cabaret dancers at Club A and C, the focus of the Mak Nyah cabaret dance is on displaying appropriate femininity and not an exaggerated display of femininity like the Mak Nyahs at Club B. Mak Nyahs dancers at Club A and C are seen as Mak Nyahs who portray appropriate level of femininity through their neat costumes, perfect posture, synchronized dance choreography and polite demeanour when interacting with the audiences. They emulate classy and eloquent gestures that are often synonymous with beauty queens and Hollywood stars. Whereas, Mak Nyah dancers at Club B have costumes that are not matching, not proportionate in height or weight, have messy dance choreographies and are also rough and vulgar when interacting with audiences.

Trautner (2005) mentions that, in exotic dance clubs, women at work must act like women by embodying traditionally female behavior and roles as well as by dressing and behaving femininely (p. 772). Because the central features of the organizational culture within exotic dance clubs are the commodification and commercialization of women's sexuality, the clubs are premised on the consumption of women's bodies and the presence of those bodies in hegemonic male fantasies. Thus, women work not only as women but also as sexualized women. Yet despite having similar underlying institutional logics, clubs offer noticeably different presentations and performances of gender and sexuality. My data demonstrate that exotic dance clubs have different organizational cultures based on distinctions made by the perceived social class of customers. Clubs construct sexuality to be consistent with client class norms and assumptions and with how the clubs and dancers think working-class or middle-class

sexuality should be expressed. Those clubs that cater to a middle-class audience present one version of sexuality, while a quite different type of display can be found at working-class clubs. As a result, women in exotic dance clubs work not only as sexualized women but also as classed women.

Any overemphasis or excessive overt display of feminine beauty is undesirable in high-end nightclubs. The successful display of a highly rehearsed routine depends upon the physical discipline of maintaining a feminine body and posture and the ability to time one's performance of femininity well enough in order not to "over perform".

In the clubs that I have researched, Club B had Mak Nyahs dancers who invariably drew laughs from the audience. These were the Mak Nyah dancers who were seen as "trying too hard", so much so that they looked pretentious and "fake". These Mak Nyah dancers had put on too much make-up, danced and cat-walked in an exaggerated manner. Their dress style could be seen as extreme, from either wearing over-the-top gowns and or cheap basic dresses. Often, the give-away was the massive swaying of hips during performances and exaggerated postures or breasts (implants or paddings) that were not proportional to their height and hips. First-time nightclub goers witnessing the cabaret dance performance are often taken aback when it is pointed out to them that said woman was, in fact, born a man.

Other than breasts implant surgeries, Mak Nyah dancers also undergo various cosmetic surgical procedures to enhance their feminine features. The widespread appreciation of "surface beauty" and exterior representations in the Mak Nyah community have made cosmetic surgery a common means for Mak Nyah to attain feminine features such as breasts, high-bridged noses, sharp chins and bigger hips.

Tactics used by Mak Nyah dancers to achieve feminine attributes are not limited to the physical performance of femininity, but include other tactics such as the adoption of a feminine. For example, Muhammad becomes Mariam, Christopher becomes Christina and Saravanan becomes Sarah. These stage names not only sound more appropriate, they also highlight the Mak Nyah dancers' desires to transgress normative gender boundaries and be known as women right from the early stages of their transformation.

Mak Nyah dancers at Club A and C call themselves showgirls and try to emulate the image of a classic American showgirl such as the Ziegfeld Follies while performing. They are typically attired in elaborately decorated costumes such as rhinestone-encrusted bras, and huge headdresses. According to my informant, Lyn D., the elements that differentiate a 'good quality' Mak Nyah dancer with a 'bad quality' Mak Nyah dancer are their height and slim figure, long legs, beauty, dance technique, costumes, elegance and grace.

For height, the good quality Mak Nyah dancers are 5'4" and over whereas bad quality Mak Nyah dancers vary in height. The illusion of long legs is important for these Mak Nyah dancers as long legs make them look statuesque, and show the costumes off to a better effect. They achieve these but wearing 5 inch platform high heels. It is important for these Mak Nyah dancers to embody and celebrate their idea of the exquisite feminine beauty. Their features are enhanced with long, thick false eyelashes, bright red lipstick, fishnet and skin color stockings, high heels and excellent posture. Fishnet and skin color stockings are ubiquitous, because they smooth out the leg skin texture and color. Stylized poses especially pose that creates the 'S' shaped figure and choreography on stage maximize their curvaceous and womanly assets.

Mak Nyah dancers at Club A and C are mostly full time dancers and hence, they put in a lot of time and effort compared to the Mak Nyah dancers at Club B who only dances for fun. They practice three days a week and for three hours each time. With training, these Mak Nyah dancers develop good dance technique and long lines in arms and legs that make them look even more statuesque when dancing.

Mak Nyah dancers costumes during shows have always been lavish, imaginative, and glittering. They usually include g-string bottoms, rhinestone-encrusted bras, and huge headdresses. Feathers of all types of birds are used (ostrich, turkey, chicken) to augment the size of the costumes without adding much weight. Even so, many of the more lavish outfits weigh 30-40 pounds, usually due to the weight of the rhinestones and the steel frames they are welded to that form backpacks, hip packs or headpieces. Moving gracefully while wearing these heavy dance outfits on one's head, shoulders or hips can be quite challenging. Mak Nyah dancers at Club A and C are required to look elegant. She should carry herself regally, moves sinuously, and always keeps an alluring look on her face. She maintains a refined presence at all times.

Their choreography eschews open-crotch positions or movements, preferentially keeping the groin area concealed with crossed thighs and demure positioning that is sensuously seductive. Mak Nyah dancers must move gracefully at every moment, no matter what costume they are wearing or what surface they are walking on or climbing. Showgirls are taught a special way to walk that accentuates the swaying of hips and a gliding motion. These techniques are essential, especially when walking while carrying 20 pounds worth of costumes on her shoulders and walking down a long staircase in 5-inch heels without looking down which requires a lot of poise and skill.

Mak Nyah dancers at Club B whose movements are often vulgar would simulate sex, with bump-and-grind, raunchy, suggestive, or hip-hop dance styles are not seen as high quality classic Mak Nyah showgirls. Mak Nyah dancers at Club A and C would catwalk, glide, twirl, and entice in a demure and elegant fashion, using self-trained dance technique.

Mak Nyah dancers at Club B who gyrate lasciviously or employ poses or movements in which their legs are spread far apart to arouse audience members are not classic Mak Nyah showgirls that perform at Club A and C. Mak Nyah dancers at Club B dance lewdly, classic Mak Nyah showgirls dance elegantly. For both of these dance forms, this is what their audiences or spectators seek out and pay for. Mak Nyah dancers at Club B elicit lust and Mak Nyah showgirls at Club A and C elicit desire, wonder and worship, Mak Nyah dancers at Club B performs their dance performances vulgarly while classic Mak Nyah showgirls at Club A and C provide glamour. Mak Nyah dancers at Club B sell their assets and often in a comedic parody way while classic Mak Nyah showgirls at Club A and C showcase their beauty.

At Club B, Mak Nyah dancers would usually further animate their bodies with boisterous and vulgar expressions of pleasure, desire, and playfulness. These dancers embodied angular lines as they moved across dance floors. They sometimes do the squatting action as part of their dance routine and spread their feet wide apart as they traveled, lowering their centers of gravity and creating a stronger sense of weight. This grounded bodily posture was adorned with surprisingly angular movements of the arms and legs, exemplified by bent knees and flexed feet, movements that cannot be found when watching the Mak Nyah cabaret dancers in Club A and C. Mak Nyah dancers at Club B are also seen making humorous gestures such as shouting and clapping making dance movements like butt out, hands on knees and sometimes even

crawling on the dirty nightclub floor with their knees and hands imitating yoga exercise cat or cow pose. These dance steps are distasteful, unhygienic and not much dance skill is needed to create such movements. Mak Nyah dancers at Club B appear vulgar and Mak Nyah dancers at Club A and C appear artistic on stage. Vulgarity is usually due to a lack of dance experience or natural grace, so movements are awkward and exaggerated. When a dancer lacks skill or beauty, she may substitute “lewd” movements to attract patrons’ interest. Certainly, Mak Nyah dancer at all three clubs may deliberately attempt to be vulgar.

For Mak Nyahs dancers at the three clubs, there are similarities when it comes to their efforts to stand out. Mak Nyah dancers would manicure their nails with shapes, colors, and patterns and make up their faces with eye shadow, eyeliner, eyebrow pencil definition, paint, powder, and rouge. Blush appears between the breasts. Dancers may vary their contact lens color. They cut, braid, color, or disguise their hair with attached hairpieces, wigs, or head coverings. They sometimes depilate their underarms and legs and shave or wax.

They would also wear suggestive costumes that include special undergarments, cocktail décolletage, or scanty dress and sequins and feathers and fur. Mak Nyah Dancers often play with symbols of femininity such costume color, high heels, garter belts, gloves, cleavage, hair, and lips.

Many of these Mak Nyah dancers do not have ambitions to showcase their identity publicly. The reasons they have for taking up the job as a Mak Nyah cabaret dancer are usually simple and straightforward, that is, for social mobility, social equality and to earn a higher wage. There is a sense of agency for them that they can use cabaret dancing to reaffirm their identity, get acknowledgement as a Mak Nyah and to have a better life. Hence, as much as cabaret dancing dictate the terms of universal

femininity that need to be performed by the Mak Nyahs, cabaret dancing at these nightclubs are also sites of empowerment for Mak Nyahs. The Mak Nyah's ability to cross normative gender boundaries through the performance of femininity, that draw romanticized notions of authentic feminine beauty which emphasized the adoption of Western features that displays modernity yet retains some form of locality and the ability to mimic and perform this femininity.

In the next chapter, I shall explore the complexities of the theories of the economies of visibility through space, agency and spectatorship amongst Mak Nyah cabaret dancers that work in these nightclub spaces.

CHAPTER 4: ECONOMICS OF VISIBILITY, AGENCY AND SPECTATORSHIP

4.1 Economies of Visibility

Club A, B and C is dependent on the Mak Nyah cabaret dance as the shows draw crowd, drive business and are spectacles that make these clubs stand out from other clubs in the Klang Valley. As mentioned previously in Chapter 1, out of eight clubs that offer Mak Nyah cabaret dance shows in the Klang Valley, I have narrowed down to these three nightclubs, Club A, B and C, because they offer more frequent weekly shows and are the most popular compared to the other clubs. Also, Club A, B and C cater to three different groups of spectators such as the wealthy elites, gays and queers, and also tourists. Hence, this thesis will not be complete without researching these three clubs as it is interesting to look at why Mak Nyah cabaret dance appeals to people from different backgrounds. I am using dance as a lens to analyze the Mak Nyah cabaret dancers and also spectatorship at nightclubs.

Kaeppler (1978) mentions dance as a form of structured movement that is socially or culturally constructed. The indigenous community of the dance form, which in this case is the Mak Nyah cabaret dancers, certifies cabaret dancing as part of their identity and culture whereas, the spectators at the nightclubs, which includes the nightclub owners, nightclub managers, nightclub workers and also nightclub goers, influence the choreography or structured movement as dance steps are created to appeal to these nightclub goers based on the social construct of these Mak Nyah dancers and what is expected from watching dance performances in nightclubs. Dance movements displayed on stage will vary in the reaction and conveyed messages as it depends on the competence of the spectator-performer and observer, as Kaeppler

(1978, p. 100) mentions. For example, the beliefs, knowledge and experience of the audiences at the nightclubs will affect how they view the Mak Nyah cabaret dance.

Kaepler (1978) states that dance is not a universal language, but socially and culturally constructed. Mak Nyah cabaret dancing is not similar to Western ballet or Indian Bharatanatyam, but unique in its own way. In a Mak Nyah cabaret dance show, the dance includes elements such as lipsynching, dancing to handbag music, parade, mimicry or dramatic actions, and playful and flirtatious interactions with the audience. For further analysis, three scenes have been chosen and separately examined from the clubs that I have investigated, Club A, B and C.

I arrive as a guest at Club A, also known in Kuala Lumpur as “the nightclub of the elites” to be greeted by the manager, Mich, who is wearing a striking red dress, with a deep V cut showing off her full D cup bosoms. We’re escorted to our seats at a table near the stage. Music pumps from the speaker system and as the audience members gradually arrives, I spot the women in the crowd holding luxury handbags from designers such as Chanel, Hermes and Yves Saint-Laurent and men with bodyguards next to them ordering bottles of Dom Perignon (a premium Champagne brand).

At 10pm, the show starts with audiences who are well-behaved. The performers are talented as the sequences are well choreographed and a lot of time and effort is put into rehearsal to make their dance routine flawless. Their impressively diverse repertoire of acts ranges from Bollywood hits to an 18th century fan dance in full period costume. One guy in the audience can’t seem to stay seated. Wearing a suit, like he’s just arrived from a fine dining dinner, I noticed that he was getting slightly drunk. He walks up to the stage and grabs the performers as they come off stage and starts dancing awkwardly and shaking his backside next to them.

The show picks up as a Mak Nyah dancer dressed as Beyonce with an uncanny likeness takes to the stage to perform Single Ladies. These dancers perform to songs with a combination of Pop music, Chinese Jazz music and sometimes even Bollywood music. “Beyonce” then walks offstage and dances around the tables in front of the stage and starts to pull men from the audience as if to demand that they notice her, that she is seen and is visible, she straddles them and gyrates. Her co-performer, dressed as Christina Aguilera starts grabbing men by the crotch. These hyperfeminine Mak Nyah cabaret dancers become hypersexual when the “touch” happens. The reaction of the audiences somehow spurs these Mak Nyahs to perform more elicit gestures. I spot male audiences pushing their guy friends forward while encouraging these Mak Nyah dancers to touch their friends. These Mak Nyahs are seen (usually) only approaching the male audiences, especially male spectators that are seen looking bored with arms folded across his chest. The nightclub space allows these Mak Nyahs to conduct such acts while performing with the body language that denotes “I am a sexy and desirable women”, with a sense of elusiveness.

At Club B, my Master’s Degree course mates and I walked inside and grabbed seats at the far right of the venue, as close to the front as we could get. There were three of us, a male and two female. I assigned my seemingly “straight” male friend to perform the role of a gay man and two of us (female) accompanying him posed as his fag hags. Fag hag is a colloquial term which signifies a heterosexual woman who always hangs out with homosexual man. My male friend, being a trained “performing artist”, performed his role perfectly as his demeanour was convincing and also he had long shoulder length hair. However, my female friend and I, who are clearly not gay, received plenty of curious stares as if we were some kind of uninvited guests or intruders. I had a great view of the stage, which displayed a shiny sequined curtain

with changing lights projecting on it, as well as a giant disco ball. Loud music blasted through the nightclub as people filled the seats, and I began to twitch in my seat out of excitement and anticipation. Just as my patience was about to wear thin, fog machines sputtered out a thin stream of fog, and the curtains opened.

The entire performance was like a LGBT community event in celebration of gender fluidity amongst the like-mindedness. As the night went on, I noticed that the people from this community (Victor Turner) were starting to enjoy themselves as they had a sense of belonging as amongst the community of the marginalized. Mak Nyah performers in elaborate shimmering costumes came out one at a time, or in groups, each performing one song after another. Some lip-synched and some danced in high heels. There was a solo dancer dressed in a red tube top and fake gold costume jewelry to emulate the fictional character *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, a Malaysian mythological celestial princess who lived on Mount Ledang (a mountain located in present-day Johore). As she was dancing to the music entitled *Asmaradana* and making exaggerated abdominal movements, like belly rolls or waves commonly performed by belly dancers, I noticed the patrons around me discussing in the Malay language “where are his genitals?” Audiences also made insulting statements such as “*Aku boleh nampak kote engkau la!*” (I can see your penis la), “*Rambut palsu you nak jatuhlah*” (your wig is going to fall off la). These statements imply an “indirect” insult that the performers did a “bad job” dressing up.

In one of the final performances, two performers wearing glittering black dresses walked off stage and came over to the table next to us, grabbing a male audience member and pulling on him on stage to dance. They gave him sloppy lipstick kisses on his cheeks, and the audience roared with laughter. I was a little uncomfortable with this as well, as I felt like a lot of the audience was making a mockery of the

performers who were just enjoying displaying their identity and celebrating their non-normative gender.

By far my favorite performance, though, was a Mak Nyah who lip-synched to the theme song from “Phantom of the Opera.” The performer started out in full makeup and dress. Throughout the performance, she slowly began to remove all of the paraphernalia that culturally defines a woman. One earring was removed, and then the other. Bra inserts came out and were flung across the stage. Wig came off, and makeup was wiped off with two aggressive flourishes. She wriggles out of her giant black gown and soon, she was left on the stage bare-chested, wearing a black jacket and pants, panting heavily. It was very powerful, and I feel a slight tug at my heartstrings thinking about all the hardship that those in the Mak Nyah community must go through every single day. I’ve been avoiding commenting in conversations around me about the Mak Nyah performers, while a lot of them made mockeries about their gender.

Mak Nyah cabaret dancers at Club C put on a flirtatious and erotic show every Tuesday. Just like Club A, customers are expected to pay a high price for the beverages that are bussed to their table. Mak Nyah dancers are always engaging in their performance as they do sexy catwalks on stage while blowing kisses and winking at the audience. The Mak Nyah cabaret dancers are always seen gliding on the dance floor with a smooth continuous motion. There are usually three to four songs that these Mak Nyah dancers perform to in a 15-minute set. In one song, a group of three dancers start with a shift of direction while kicking with alternate legs at a 45-degree angle, combined with multiple extensions of the arms towards their sides in different directions. The dancers then perform two full backbends, almost at a 90-degree angle and walk slowly to the beat of the music up the stairs and onto the

stage while deliberately showcasing their long, slim legs and disappear behind the curtains as the music fades.

The same group of dancers at Club A performs here but with that being said, I noticed that choreographies are slightly different as the stage and dance floor is much bigger compared to Club A and B. Movement is more constrained at Club A and B but at Club C, dancers are able to perform higher kicks, can do triple spins instead of just one spin and also have five dancers perform instead of just two or three at Club A and B. The song choices are also more theatrical as they use Broadway music and the lights setup and perfect lighting cues enable the show to have more dramatic special effects compared to Club A and C. Although the venue has two floors, the audiences on the upper floor are able to view the dynamic performances of the dancers on the lower floor. This nightclub is also packed every single night with two thirds of the crowd being foreign tourists due to its strategic location near hotels and main tourist sites in the Klang Valley.

Occasionally, these Mak Nyah cabaret dancers would give the dance a more localized and exotic taste. They wear Malaysian ethnic costumes such as Chinese cheongsam and Indian lengha, copy traditional Malaysian dance moves such as the Joget or Indian dance gestures and use dance props such as Chinese fans to give the performance a somewhat localized fusion of the three main ethnic groups, Malay, Chinese, and Indian.

I attended weekly performances at Club A, B and C during the duration of my field work and, as mentioned in Chapter 3, there are difference and yet similarities between all three clubs. Although the performer-spectator relationships between the three clubs are different, through the sultry dances and sometimes exaggerated costumes I realized that it doesn't matter whether audience reaction was positive or negative,

these Mak Nyahs achieved what they had hoped for, which is the opportunity to be visible. It really did not matter if the intentions of the audience were good or bad. The bottom line is, the attention given by these spectators, through their claps, whistles, screams, laugh and comments allowed Mak Nyah dancers to have agency and fulfilled their needs in being acknowledged by the audiences as their voices are heard through dance, attire and performance.

Mak Nyah dancers at Clubs A, B and C are often seen using dance movements to seduce and tantalise their spectators, such as touching or caressing themselves while making eye contacts with the audience according to the rhythm of the music. This emotive act communicates femininity and the sexually voyeuristic performance appeals to spectators at all three nightclubs.

As the Mak Nyah dancers at Clubs A and C are more experienced and better trained, spectators are often treated to a virtuoso, high-energy performance, in which the dance execution is always under precise rhythmic control. The dancing body can be seen centred and arms are often used for balance as these dancers are always dancing in high heels. Also for the purpose of balancing while dancing in high heels, there aren't many knee-bending or squatting movements but arm gestures are seen extending exhilaratingly upwards or outwards, with an energy and expansiveness at odds with the contained and inward movement associated with pretty femininity.

The Mak Nyah cabaret is not just a performance but also a spectacle for nightclub goers, a spectacle of femininity on display. Often, first-time nightclub goers witnessing cabaret dance performance are taken aback when it is pointed out to them that the women dancing on stage was, in fact, born a man. This makes the Mak Nyah dancers hypervisible, as curious audiences naturally scrutinise every detail of their performance and physical appearance. Patronizing a nightclub that offers Mak Nyah

cabaret performances is a rare opportunity for audiences to witness the talents of Mak Nyah dancers in Klang Valley because performances by Mak Nyahs are almost never showcased in public, on television or on a frequent basis. In the eyes of full-time and professional Mak Nyah cabaret dancers at Club A and C, the focus of the Mak Nyah cabaret dance is on the display of appropriate femininity versus the display of exaggerated femininity found in Mak Nyah performances at Club B.

Through this, Mak Nyahs are required to be hypervisible as they are hired to be the centre of attraction in these clubs. Excessive display of feminine beauty is not desired in high-end nightclubs. The successful display of a highly rehearsed routine depends upon the physical discipline of maintaining a desirable feminine body and posture and the ability to time one's performance of femininity well enough in order not to "over perform."

In the clubs that I have researched, Club B had Mak Nyah dancers who invariably drew laughs from the audience. These were the Mak Nyah dancers who were seen as "trying too hard," so much so that they looked pretentious and "fake." These Mak Nyah dancers had put on too much make-up, danced and cat-walked in an exaggerated manner. Their dressing would be seen as extreme, from either wearing over-the-top gowns or cheap basic dresses. Often, the give-away was the massive swaying of hips during performances and exaggerated postures or breasts (implants or padding) that were disproportional to their height, structure of their torso and hips.

Mak Nyah dancers at Clubs A and C call themselves showgirls and try to emulate the image of a classic American showgirl such as the Ziegfeld Follies while performing. They are typically attired in elaborately decorated costumes such as rhinestone-encrusted bras, and huge headdresses. According to my informant, Lyn D., the elements that differentiates a "good quality" Mak Nyah dancer with a "bad

quality” Mak Nyah dancers are height, slim figures, long legs, facial beauty, and elegant dance technique, as opposed to short, stumpy, chubby, overweight, bad makeup and styling skills, and clumsy dance skills.

Mak Nyah dancers at Clubs A and C are mostly full-time dancers and hence, they put in a lot of time and effort compared to the dancers at Club B who only dance for fun or as an occasional hobby. Full-time dancers practice three days a week and for three hours each time. With training, these Mak Nyah dancers develop good dance technique and long lines in arms and legs that make them look even more statuesque when dancing.

During shows, Mak Nyah dancers have always had costumes that looked lavish, imaginative and glittering. They usually include g-string bottoms, rhinestone-encrusted bras, and huge headdresses. Feathers of all types of birds are used (ostrich, turkey, chicken) to augment the size of the costumes without adding much weight. Even so, many of the more lavish outfits weigh 30-40 pounds, usually due to the weight of the rhinestones and the steel frames they are welded to that form the backpacks, hip packs or headpieces. Moving gracefully while wearing these heavy dance outfits on one's head, shoulders or hips can be quite challenging. Dancers at Clubs A and C are required to look elegant and classy. She should carry herself regally, move sinuously while always keeping an alluring look on her face. She maintains a refined presence at all times.

Their choreography eschews open-crotch positions or movements, preferentially keeping the groin area concealed with crossed thighs and demure positioning that is sensuously seductive. Mak Nyah dancers must move gracefully at every moment, no matter what costume they are wearing or what surface they are walking or climbing on. Just like the American showgirls, they practice a special way of walking that

accentuates the swaying of hips. These techniques are essential, especially when a dancer is carrying 20 pounds worth of costume on her shoulders and walking down a long staircase in 5-inch heels without looking down.

Mak Nyah dancers at Club B would often showcase movements that simulate sex such as bumping and grinding, acts that are raunchy or suggestive and also masculine hip-hop dance styles that are considered vulgar by Mak Nyah dancers at Clubs A and C. In Clubs A and C, Mak Nyah dancers would catwalk, glide, twirl, and entice the audiences in a demure and elegant fashion, using self-trained dance techniques which required years of training.

Often, Mak Nyah dancers at Club B entertain by gyrating lasciviously or employ poses and movements that requires them to spread their legs far apart in an attempt to arouse the audiences. Dance steps like these are uncommon at Clubs A and C. Dancers at Club B dance lewdly while Mak Nyah dancers at Clubs A and C dance elegantly. For both of these forms of hypervisibility, this is what their audiences or spectators seek out and pay for. Mak Nyah dancers at Club B elicit lust and Mak Nyah showgirls at Club B perform vulgarly while classic Mak Nyah showgirls at Clubs A and C provide glamour.

Mak Nyah dancers at Club B are seen embodying angular lines while they perform and move across dance floors. They sometimes do the squatting action as part of their dance routine and spread their feet wide apart as they travelled, lowering their centre of gravity and creating a stronger sense of weight. This grounded bodily posture was adorned with surprisingly angular movements of the arms and legs, exemplified by bent knees and flexed feet. Boisterous movements like this are avoided by cabaret dancers in Clubs A and C. I observed that Mak Nyah dancers at Club B would sometimes spontaneously break out of their routine by making humorous gestures

such as shouting and clapping while making movements like sticking their butt out and with their hand on their knees. They would even sometimes ignore that they are wearing mini skirts which caused their undergarments to be in full view of the audience and start crawling on the dirty nightclub floor with their hands and knees imitating yoga exercise poses such as the cat or cow pose. These dance steps are distasteful, unhygienic and not much skill is needed to create such movements. On stage, Mak Nyah at Club B appear vulgar and Mak Nyah at Clubs A and C appear artistic. Vulgarity is usually portrayed when there is a lack of dance experience or natural grace, so movements are awkward and exaggerated. When a dancer lacks skill or beauty, she may substitute “lewd” movements to attract patrons’ interest. Certainly, Mak Nyah dancers at all three clubs may deliberately attempt to be vulgar.

Many of these Mak Nyah dancers do not have ambitions to showcase their identity publicly. Their reasons for becoming cabaret dancers are usually simple and straightforward, that is, for social mobility, social equality and to earn a higher wage. There is a sense that they can use cabaret dance to reaffirm their identity, get acknowledgement as a Mak Nyah and to have a better life. Hence, as much as cabaret dancing dictates the terms of universal femininity that needs to be performed by the Mak Nyahs, cabaret dancing at these nightclubs serves as a site of empowerment for them. Cabaret dancing allows Mak Nyahs the ability to cross normative gender boundaries through the performance of femininity.

Mak Nyah cabarets and nightclubs are platforms where the visibility of the Mak Nyah is increased. In this chapter, I examined how Mak Nyah cabaret dance has grown from being a purely commercial enterprise to a viable avenue for Mak Nyahs to gain social mobility, status, power and even acceptance. Through Mak Nyah figures like multi-millionaire business women Nur Sajat, the fate of a Mak Nyah can

transform overnight from oppressed individual to social media icon, admired for their beauty and wealth by the whole nation. The emphasis on appearances often culminates in elaborate displays of wealth and pomp in many rituals. The invisibility that gender androgyny has given them disappears. Now, their attempts at transgressing newly defined gender categories make them visible in society. Within these nightclub spaces, Mak Nyah dancers are allowed to be highly visible.

These nightclubs also allow Mak Nyah dancers to escape from ignorant gender repercussions from the society that restricts their visibility and this also gives them space to perform their cross-dressing. In these clubs, there is an increasing tolerance, if not acceptance, of Mak Nyahs derived from their skills of performing, imitating and enacting this new feminine beauty successfully. Their ability to transform themselves and imitate this ideal femininity has gained them recognition within the nightclub spaces and helped them cement a new positive Mak Nyah identity.

Out of the nightclub space, Mak Nyahs dress moderately and prefer not to be seen. Their movements are very discreet in the daytime. This is because they are constantly harassed and become targets of mockery. They take on an ambiguous positionality of being “invisible while visible”. However, the situation changes as these Mak Nyah dancers transform into highly visible beauty queens and stage divas when they perform at Club A, B, and C.

Mak Nyah performers are often seen dancing and making exaggerated hip movements such as wiggling and shaking their hips. This form of dance move is also seen as a hyper-feminine act. As mentioned by Burt (2001), “...the fact that “you” are allowed to wiggle “your” hips in public reveals that “we” are not allowed to so. Why not? Because “we” are male and “our” gaze challenge “you” are too: only girls and gay men wiggle their hips in public” (pp. 209-242).

Mak Nyah dancers are known to emulate the looks of popular female idols such as Beyonce, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera. In these clubs, Mak Nyah dancers are allowed and are expected to look “loud”, “extravagant”, and “over-the-top” and they are seen as “spectacles” that draw huge numbers of spectators. Their dressing and dancing exemplifies these qualities. They become hypervisible through their hyperfeminine costumes such as short tight-fitting dresses with low necklines, and sensual movements comprising of hip sways and shimmies. Mak Nyah cabaret dancers are very “theatrical” in terms of their dance movements, facial expressions, and song choices and are able to mimic exactly the style of the original singer.

Their costumes and makeup often comprise of heavily sequined or beaded long beauty pageant evening gowns with gigantic showgirls feathered headpieces or fur over their shoulders. These Mak Nyahs use makeup to highlight their feminine features such as high and sharp noses plus high cheekbones and hide their masculine features such as strong jawbones and big foreheads. Mak Nyah dancers at Club A and C wear expensive and more elaborate costumes compared to Mak Nyah dancers at Club B who are seen donning only basic dresses.

Mak Nyah dancers at Club A and C have large breasts and buttocks due to the enhancement surgery. The Mak Nyahs dancers at Club A and C have a higher “earning power” and hence, are able to afford better clothes, makeup, and surgery. Mak Nyah dancers would often create an illusion of bigger breasts by making use of padded or push-up bras together with makeup to emphasize the cleavage area in order to look more “womanly and feminine”.

Mak Nyah dancers at Club A and C are full-time dancers and spend many hours rehearsing. They carefully plan out their weekly costumes and performances so that their performances are in sync and look “well put together” compared to the dancers

at Club B who only dance for fun as they have daytime jobs and do not have much time to rehearse their dance routines.

All these efforts demonstrate that the portrayal of hyperfemininity, through their dance, gestures, and costumes, is important for these Mak Nyah dancers, as perfecting these elements enables them to demand higher paychecks. Particularly, Mak Nyah dancers in Club A and C are much more in demand, hence, their popularity grants them greater bargaining power. They demand high salaries with an average of RM6000 a month. They also become more selective when it comes to job options. For example, they can choose to withdraw from venues that do not guarantee “protection” from religious authorities.

The assurance of being “protected” by the well-connected nightclub owners gives them the agency to be hypervisible within these nightclub spaces. However, once they step out of the clubs, there are places that they would avoid going to and would often dress down in baggy or masculine clothing minus their makeup and elaborate hairdo in order to avoid unwanted attention. In public, they often feel threatened and prefer being invisible to the public eye.

Baudry (2011) explains that in a film like Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* breaks “narrative and makes the invisible visible” (p. 43). We do not lose ourselves in the film, so much as we exist emerge, really in the contact between our body and the film’s body. It is not a matter of simply identifying with the characters on screen, or with the body of the director or camera operator, for example. Rather, we are in a relationship of intimate, tactile, reversible contact with the film’s body as a complex relationship that is marked as often by tension as by alignment, by repulsion as often as by attraction.

4.2 Agency through Mak Nyah Dance Cabaret

In public, these Mak Nyah dancers are silenced by the law, religion and media but cabaret dancing and nightclubs they perform at allows them agency and empowerment. However, there are also grey areas as this sense of agency can also be taken away from them and the power is given to those who assess their beauty and femininity as seen in Club B. The sense of agency or real power can be said to lie in the hands of the nightclub patrons. They feel a sense of agency and are positive about their efforts to improve their lives and increase the level of acceptance for people like them.

The sense of agency, or sense of control, is the subjective awareness of initiating, executing, and controlling one's own free actions in the world. It is the pre-specified awareness or implied sense that it is I who is executing physical movements or thinking thoughts. Jeannerod (2003) mentions that the meaning of agency is fundamentally the freedom and sufficiency to live or act in a defined world. In an abstract sense, we can interpret this in a few different ways. Through cabaret dancing, we can observe these Mak Nyah dancers having the ability to make choices, act freely and control their respective lives within this profession.

Agency is the ability for a person, or agent, to decide or act for him or herself. A person who is not allowed to decide for him or herself is lacking in agency, or is said to have been denied agency. In patriarchal societies, women often lack agency compared to their male counterparts. When men speak on behalf of women, they deny them agency. Women should be allowed to speak for themselves, as dismissing or lowering the value of a work created by a woman through the denial of agency implies and directly states that a woman is not worthy or capable enough to create work that is on par with men.

Martin Hewson, an Associate at the York Centre for International and Security Studies of York University, describes three types of agency, namely, individual, proxy, and collective. Individual agency is when a person acts on his/her own behalf, whereas proxy agency is when an individual acts on behalf of someone else (such as an employer). Collective agency occurs when people act together, such as a social movement. Hewson also identifies three properties of human beings that give rise to agency: intentionality, power, and rationality. Human beings act with intention and are goal oriented. They also have differing amounts of abilities and resources resulting in some having greater agency (power) than others. Finally, human beings use their intellect to guide their actions and predict the consequences of those actions. In the studies of these Mak Nyah dancers, their intention would be to use cabaret dancing as a platform to showcase their gender, elevate their status as they have the power to demand high wages. The rationality of these Mak Nyahs taking up the role of performing in clubs is that they can only perform in enclosed spaces such as nightclubs, as public spaces would attract too much attention from the public and possibly religious authorities.

Mak Nyah dancers have individual agency, proxy agency as cabaret dancers and representatives of the Mak Nyah dance community (to pitch themselves to nightclub employers) and collective agency as they share the same identity, goals and objectives, such as increasing their visibility via their dance performance.

Agency may either be classified as unconscious, involuntary behaviour or purposeful, goal-directed activity (intentional action). An agent typically has some sort of immediate awareness of their physical activity and the goals that the activity is aimed at realising. In goal directed activity, an agent asserts direct control or guidance over his or her own behaviour.

Wandor (1998) mentions the act of rebellion by using cross-dressing as a theatrical tool (as cited in Thiagarajan, 2012, p. 151). “Drag” and “Camp” are used by Mak Nyahs on these cabaret stages to challenge the “norms” of masculinity and femininity. Thiagarajan (2012) argues that “queer” male dancers claim agency through their provocative choreographies and their act of embracing “deviant” gender and sexual practices offstage (p. 153).

The Mak Nyah community mainly prefers keeping within their own circle and prefers performing and socialising in a private space for “safety reasons”, away from the eyes of the religious authorities or radical Muslims who might report them to the authorities. Hence, the majority of their cabaret dance shows are in private night clubs with tight security or they are private corporate shows such as birthday parties and company annual dinners.

“I love dancing in the cabaret and it allows us to perform our abilities (kebolehan). I feel that I can be myself (jadi diri sendiri) and I feel like a real woman when I am dancing and all dressed up in those beautiful dresses (baju cantik).”

Interview with Mak Nyah cabaret dancer, Lynn (personal communication, April 9, 2017)

Mak Nyah Dancers see the nightclub that they are performing in as a “safe space” to be hyper visible. They feel that compared to public spaces where they are often scrutinized, the dark and dim lighting at the nightclub gives them a mysterious image or persona and also allows them to perform and emulate their idols such as Beyonce, Christina Aguilera, Jennifer Lopez, etc.

Mak Nyah dancers believe that the nightclub management treats them like any other employee and they are not only protected but also respected by their fellow colleagues such as waiters, bouncers and disc jockeys. They are provided with a proper changing room and rest area, drinking water, and are allowed to use the female toilets.

Mak Nyah dancers also believe that authorities do not “disturb” or “harass” them as nightclub owners are often “well connected.” Hence, they would be informed beforehand if there was a raid.

Speaking to my informant and nightclub owner, Shir D, she agreed that having connections “up there” helps in protecting not only the performers but also the identity of their ultra-elite patrons. However, it is still risky to hold a show in a private venue, especially when organizers do not take precautions.

4.3 Spectatorship of Mak Nyah Dance Cabaret

Even if the Mak Nyah cabaret dance performance starts out tame within these nightclubs, audiences becomes boozed up as the night goes on. Under the influence of alcohol, the audience’s reactions turn to wolf-whistles, laughter and loud cheers, as if to encourage and appreciate “entertainment and amusement” amidst the glamour.

According to Metz (2011) & Baudry (2011), when studying film, the spectator does not identify as much with the characters on screen but with the film apparatus itself. This means that they identify with the camera and projector more than anything they actually see on the screen. Baudry (2011) speaks of a “transcendental subject whose place is taken by the camera which constitutes and rules objects in this [film] ‘world’” (p. 42). He (the spectator) identifies less with the spectacle/image than what makes the image itself. Baudry (2011) says that the mirror recognition of self and the

transcendence of the camera work together as the “giver of unifying meaning” and are thus both necessary in spectator identification. Additionally, Baudry (2011) says, “this substitution [of identification with the camera] is only possible on the condition that the instrumentation itself be hidden or repressed” (p. 43). A film like Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* breaks “narrative and makes the invisible visible” (p. 43). While slightly outside the scope of this report, Baudry (2011) talks about how this film makes the camera known, and breaks the “suturing” of spectator and camera that occurs when watching a narrative film. In his words, a film like this removes “both specular tranquility and the assurance of one’s own identity” (p. 43). For Metz (2011), the spectator’s identification with the look is simultaneous with identification with the camera. So, “it is true that as he identifies with himself as look, the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera, too, which has looked before him at what he is now looking” (p. 25). Furthermore, Metz explains identification with the projector as well due to the physical absence of the camera in the film-viewing experience. In identifying with the camera, Metz too speaks of the spectator’s transcendence. Without it, the movement of images on the screen without the movement of the spectator in the theatre could not be understood. He says, “His identification with the movement of the camera being that of a transcendental, not an empirical subject” (p. 26). The camera, in both theorists’ view, therefore places the spectator in a place above any of the characters in the film. In identifying with the camera, the spectator places himself in a position of power over the film. In this case, the audiences at the night clubs assumes that said ‘power’ as paying customers. Thus far, the spectator has been recognized as male. Both Baudry and Metz refer to the spectator as “he” in their writings. However, how does this assumption affect the female viewer, especially when one takes into account, in Mulvey (2011), the theory of the woman as object? If

the woman's purpose in film is to be looked at, then how can female spectators be an active viewer and identify with their likenesses on screen? Mulvey establishes the problem as this. De Lauretis sets out to solve it. De Lauretis says that the female spectator's identification cannot alternate between both the subject/looker and object/image because then she becomes stuck in limbo between the two (p. 586). Instead, she abandons the differentiation between masculine and feminine spectatorship because otherwise identification is always "entirely masculine" (p. 587) and impossible for a female to participate in. However, as we have seen, the spectator must participate in some form of identification for the film to have meaning. So, De Lauretis proposes "the identification (of oneself) with something other (than oneself)" (p. 585). Here, she introduces her second level of identification, that with the narrative image. The narrative image is the combination between story and image, the role a woman plays within the narrative versus an image of her without any context (p. 584). This identification, De Lauretis says, is figural, "[consisting] of the double identification with the figure of narrative movement, the mythical subject, and with the figure of narrative closer, the narrative image" (p. 587). By this she means that the female spectator identifies with both her specific feminine likeness on the screen and with the active look previously attributed to men only. Her identification exists in what De Lauretis refers to as the movement of narrative discourse itself. She recognizes herself as an integral part of the progression of the narrative, acting as more than an image. instead of being trapped between the rigidity of male/subject female/object identification codes, she is both passive and active.

So, as we can see, there are many different forms of spectator identification. It is a very complex but necessary part of film. Different spectators identify in different ways, and no one theory on identification is completely appropriate for every

spectator. Identification, however, is necessary for the spectator to create meaning from the images, as spectatorship is necessary for the film to exist.

Although it can be said that a successful performance of femininity by Mak Nyah dancers earns respect and social status, it is important to ask who possesses this power. On the one hand, it would seem that the performers, in their ability to embody beauty and femininity, have power and agency. On the other hand, power can be said to be resting in the hands of those who evaluate these performances of transformations and femininity. A performance is also subjected to rejection by the spectators, which include nightclub owners, nightclub managers, and nightclub goers. Mak Nyah cabaret dancing can be displayed and sold to the audience for their consumption and the very same audience has the power to reject such images and subject the performance to shame. Spectators are powerful in dictating the standard on which the performance is judged.

The spectatorship of Mak Nyah cabaret dance is complex as our dance-eye is informed by societal stereotypes of how Mak Nyah dancers are supposed to perform and behave onstage, such as loud colored and flamboyant costumes, feminine dance moves, twirls, kicks and sexy catwalks. However, as a researcher, yet these expectations are often required to be under constant review using kinesthetic empathy.

In kinesthetic empathy, dance is not something that just happens on stages. We analyze body language including hand gesticulations, winking and the choreography of bodies. Seat arrangements and audience reactions are also analyzed. Spectators of dance experience kinesthetic empathy when, even while sitting still, they feel they are participating in the movements they observe, and experience related feelings and ideas.

Observations during my fieldwork allowed me to sympathize and attempt to mimic the experiences of these Mak Nyah dancers as I would often find myself thinking thoughts such as “Her feet must be hurting from wearing those five inch heels for so many hours”, “The stage is too small to make big or exaggerated dance movements” or “The costumes would feel so heavy.”

The liminality of the identities of these Mak Nyah dancers often leave the audiences confused yet at the same time intrigued these spectators as audiences are often in awe with how a person who is born a male can transform oneself into a beautiful woman. They are both a spectacle and a paradox for having the ability to switch genders using costumes and makeup. During shows, male spectators are often seen “checking out” these Mak Nyah dancers but would often be embarrassed to admit it.

The author Juliana Starr said in her book *Men Looking at Women through Art: Male Gaze and Spectatorship in Three Nineteenth-Century French Novels*. (Page 8-34)⁸ “Her body is arranged the way it is, to display it to the man looking at the picture. The picture is made to appeal to his sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality... Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own.”

“...Feminist criticism has shown an acute interest in the role played by the gaze in the creation of male erotic fantasies. By associating vision with the masculine perversion of voyeurism, feminist criticism, particularly in the study of cinema and art history, has demonstrated a renewed interest in the psychoanalytic notion of femininity as a visual representation of male sexual desire.”⁹ In one of her case

⁸ Starr, Juliana. "Men Looking at Women through Art: Male Gaze and Spectatorship in Three Nineteenth-Century French Novels." *Revue Frontenac* 10-11.(1993): 8-34.

⁹ Obviously, as a female researcher idolizing and observing these Mak Nyah performers, I am not convinced that only men are voyeurs, however, most psychologists and feminist critics conceive of voyeurism as primarily a masculine perversion. See Freud, Irigaray, and Mulvey.

studies (page 12), Starr mentions a scene where the character Coriolis sees a woman Manette for the first time at a “spectacle” Coriolis spent all evening gazing voyeuristically at the dancing women whom he describes as an array of aesthetically pleasing body parts. For Freud, Fetishism involves the subjects’ tendency to deny the sexual objects’ wholeness and individuality in order to concentrate on only certain body part(s) or accessories which replace the “normal” sexual object: “The substitute for the sexual object is generally a part of the body but little adapted for sexual purposes, such as the foot, or hair, or an inanimate object...”(1930, 70)

Mulvey (page 18) notes that the pleasurable expectations of narrative cinema depend largely upon the objectification of the erotic figure—an objectification made possible, in part, through “the separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen” (365). Moreover, writes Mulvey, the voyeuristic experience is enhanced in the movie theater by the extreme contrast of light and dark provided by the auditorium versus the cinema screen.

A sense of this voyeuristic separation is created in *L'Education Sentimentale* through the use of light and dark in the construction of Frederic’s gaze. On many occasions he displays the classical voyeur’s fascination with lighted windows. As he stands in the dark street at night gazing longingly at the squares of light emanating from Madame Arnous’s home, the play of images is similar to the spectator’s cinematic experience of gazing at a bright screen while seated in a dark theater

Drawing on Freudian notions of fetishism, Mulvey emphasizes classical Hollywood cinema’s voyeuristic tendency to fragment the female body through its generous use of close-ups-shots which, in highlighting Dietrich’s legs or Garbo’s

Face, tend to flatten and iconize images of women while denying their three-dimensional individuality (page 367)

Mulvey (page 36) points out that performing woman holds a special fascination for the voyeuristic gaze by fulfilling a double purpose as erotic object for both the characters within the narrative as well as for the spectator, providing a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the picture. In her words, “As woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters...are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude” (367). Thus, Mulvey writes, “the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the narrative into a sort of no-man’s-land outside its own time and space” (367).

In Munoz’s article *Gesture, Ephemerality, and Queer Feeling* (Page 434). The author speaks of a black drag queen star that is an expert in “the illusions of drag” and a pro at hyper-visibility. “He then sings his club hit “Cunty.” He sings “Feeling like a Lilly/Feeling like a Rose” and as he stands in place, his body quivers with extravagant emotion. He stands center stage, and as he screams, he quivers with an emotional force that connotes the stigma of gender ostracism. His gender freakiness speaks to the audiences that surround him. His is an amplified and extreme queer body, a body in motion that rapidly deploys the signs, the gestures, of queer communication, survival, and self-making.

Spectators are often mesmerized by the gender fluidity of these Mak Nyah dancers and their ability to constantly transform themselves like a chameleon using clothing such as dresses, high heel platforms shoes, wigs and makeup to enhance their physical outlook such as cleavage, full buttocks, long legs, slim waist to appeal to the spectators. These Mak Nyah dancers would practically transform into creatures that man wants to date and what woman want to be.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This study examines the challenges and struggles of the “threatened” and “invisible” Mak Nyahs and their involvement in the history of cabaret dance performance in Malaysia. Malaysian Mak Nyahs are often ostracized by government, media and society and are painted as HIV-infected streetwalkers or prostitutes. However, these transwomen are capable of becoming powerful and well-respected individuals in the society.

This research explores how “invisible” Mak Nyahs emerge as “hypervisible” cabaret dance performers at three nightclubs in Klang Valley and hence, gain access and power at the nightclubs.

In this study, I have also explored the Mak Nyah cabaret dance performance in three nightclubs in Klang Valley and how these nightclubs had enabled Mak Nyahs to gain agency. Even though the Mak Nyah cabaret has been performed in Klang Valley for more than twenty years, many nightclub goers that I have interviewed saw this as a “new” and “current” trend. These Mak Nyahs are slowly seen “coming out” due to social media outlets like Instagram and Facebook, where many of these Mak Nyah dancers are able to promote themselves and also lure the public to watch their shows in those clubs.

My research examines how spectatorship between the audience and performer affects research in dance and explores how the economies of visibility, agency, and spectatorship play out in the Mak Nyah cabaret dance performance in the nightclubs in Klang Valley. Mak Nyah dancers in this study have used cabaret dancing as a form of empowering tool to elevate their status in the society. These dancers turn the gaze

of straight and gay audience towards them, thus, allowing them to circulate as important assets to the nightclubs I have studied.

A multitude of meanings can be extracted from these weekly Mak Nyah cabaret dance performance in the nightclubs that I have investigated. These Mak Nyah cabaret dancers were able to not only perform a polished routine of femininity onstage, they had also retained the agency that they held as a Mak Nyah dancer at these nightclubs. Mak Nyahs perform a transgression of gender boundaries and have established cabaret dancing as a passport for social respect and mobility through the performance of the Mak Nyah cabaret dancer identity that is based on feminine beauty and actions. This thesis has argued that the context in which cabaret dancing emerged in the Klang Valley is controlled by the spectators from these enterprises and avenues in which a positive Mak Nyah identity can be displayed and consumed.

In Chapter 2, I have shown how the Mak Nyah community have endured the complexities on the law, religion and media in Malaysia. The visibility of the Mak Nyahs, exposed by a state-driven legislation and policy, identifies them as a group of “men” who are trying to transgress gender boundaries.

The Mak Nyah community constantly looks out for vehicles such as dialogues and support group to consolidate a new and positive image for these Mak Nyahs based on education, awareness and empowerment. The Mak Nyah cabaret dance has somewhat become ritualized performances for Mak Nyahs as within the entertainment and performance industry, this is what they are constantly hired for. Their dance style have adopted a Western appearance and modernity, while retaining a splash of local cultural elements. Through cabaret dancing, these Mak Nyahs have created a new positive identity for themselves and also avenues on which femininity and gender transgression are expected and executed. Yet the process of reclaiming of public

recognition and agency in making their own identity is a double-edged one. At one level, while the nightclubs provide Mak Nyahs with a space to establish a self-identity through repetitive (and weekly) acts, these venues also subjugates them by subjecting them to the critic of the spectators at the nightclubs. It is within these intricate juxtapositions of the simultaneous possibilities of both agency and spectatorship contradictions that I examined the intricacies in the economies of visibility in Mak Nyah cabaret dance.

I looked at the historical development of cabaret in Malaysia and introduced three nightclubs in Chapter 3. The focus of what the audiences are expecting in all three nightclubs is on the dancers' ability to subvert masculinity and emulate femininity to good effect during their stage performances. The emphasis on surface representations translates into transformations that are limited to superficial enhancements of facial and body features and the discipline in dancing while maintaining a feminine poise. Cabaret dancing requires these Mak Nyahs to engage in highly disciplined routine of performing femininity and the Mak Nyah cabaret dancer is defined and began to be known by employers for the ability to perform and be visible through these ritualized performances of femininity.

In Chapter 4, I show how the on-stage performances of femininity and the institution of Mak Nyah cabaret dance, though often limited to surface performances of femininity, can become sites of empowerment for Mak Nyahs. I asserted the importance of Mak Nyah dance cabaret as stages on which Mak Nyahs can mediate and gain social respect and status, through their mastery in performing notions of idealized femininity. The ability to fit into a socially determined criterion of feminine beauty earns them power and respect from their spectators. This gives Mak Nyahs a sense of agency, that they are able to improve their own lives and balance their

subverted existence as minorities. The positive outcomes of being a sought after Mak Nyah dancer or dance group outweigh the impediments of performing an idealized femininity and nightclubs become sites of empowerment for a reification of their Mak Nyah identity for these Mak Nyahs, albeit on an individual level. However, such power at the individual level can be said to be ambivalent as Mak Nyahs are also subjected to the audiences' assessment of their performance. Audiences, made up of nightclub owners, nightclub managers, and nightclub goers in general hold power in dictating the standards in which they have to fit into. The mediation of power, priorities and agendas between nightclub owners, nightclub managers, and nightclub goers can also dictate the employment of the Mak Nyah cabaret dancers. The reiteration of "acceptance through dance" can be seen as a double-edged sword, one that reinforces the Mak Nyahs discriminated position and subjects them to a perpetual race to catch up by mimicking mainstream beauty and the imposed standards of idealized or even absolute femininity.

Mak Nyah cabaret dance have been gaining popularity and are here to stay. In a country where law, religion and media greatly affects minorities such as the Mak Nyahs, Mak Nyah dance cabaret have evolved into sites for the reconstruction of a new and positive identity. It is an avenue through which Mak Nyahs can negotiate for visibility, social respect and hopefully acceptance. This Mak Nyah cabaret dance culture, through its repetitive displays, is internalized as part of the nocturnal economy and culture. The Mak Nyah cabaret dancer, known for her powers in transformations, dance skills and the performance of femininity, has set new expectations within their own Mak Nyah community and also the spectators that these Mak Nyahs are not just prostitutes and street walkers but talented individuals. Hence, the Mak Nyah dance cabaret will remain an important avenue of visibility for the Mak

Nyah identity and image to gain gradual acceptance from the society. Despite the fact that the nation, state, community and even family members of these Mak Nyahs are constantly scrutinizing individuals who do not match masculine and feminine gender norms, I hypothesize that there will be an increase in Mak Nyah cabarets in more clubs in the years to come.

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