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EDITORIAL

This issue of *SEARCH: The Journal of the South East Asia Research centre for Communication and Humanities* is made up of four papers from different perspectives in the Humanities.

The first article by L.V. Sankar explores the roles and rituals practiced by Malaysian Iyer women and the extent to which these roles and rituals marked their identity. Using qualitative techniques, she visited, interviewed and observed Iyer women during home visits and at cultural and religious events. Results show that this community of women support traditional roles that define them as wives, daughters and daughters-in-law.

The second article by Yang Lai Fong and Md. Sidin Ishak explores gatekeeping roles employed by Malaysian newspapers in reporting interethnic conflict. The study employed the Gatekeeping theory to find out how news media shape stories. They found that political reasons were the primary external factor influencing the gatekeeping of the newspapers in their coverage of interethnic conflicts. This study indicates that gatekeeping was found to reflect a struggle between dominant social norms and efforts for change when reporting interethnic conflict.

The third article is by Kuang Ching Hei, Wong Ngan Ling and Maya Khemlani David. They analysed the perceptions of Malaysians in engaging silence and in using spoken words as a tool of communication in their daily interactions. Using questionnaires as a data collection method in three public universities, they found that most Malaysians appear to opt for silence when emotionally depressed and when faced with 'money' issues. This finding suggests that 'money issue' is something many Malaysians find difficult to talk about as it involves some instances of face-threatening acts.

The fourth article by Hamid Farahmandian explores the plight of girls living in a patriarchal society and how the men in their lives shape their identities. Using two Malaysian novels to explore the shaping of two women living in patriarchal situations, he finds that women take on multiphrenia when faced with oppressive living situations.

It is hoped that readers will find the rich information contained in the above four articles are both stimulating as well as enriching. I would like to thank the authors for their contributions, the reviewers for providing valuable feedback, Ms. Stella Melkion of Taylor's Press for her work in ensuring quality for this journal and the management of Taylor's University for financial support in publishing this journal.

We welcome suggestions for improvements to this journal and hope that all readers benefit through the contributions of this issue.

Associate Prof. Dr. Lokasundari Vijaya Sankar
Editor-in-Chief

SEARCH: The Journal of the South East Asia Research Centre for Communication and Humanities

March 2015

Women's Roles and Participation in Rituals in the Maintenance of Cultural Identity: A Study of the Malaysian Iyers

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the roles and rituals practiced by Malaysian Iyer women. The Iyers are a small community of Tamil Brahmins who live and work mainly in the Klang Valley. As an Indian diasporic community, who moved to Malaysia from the early 1900s, they have been slowly shifting from Tamil to English and Malay. They are upwardly mobile and place great emphasis on education but at the same time, value their traditions and culture. Data was derived from interactions between women and men from the Malaysian Iyer community together with personal observations made during visits to their homes, weddings and prayer sessions. This data was studied to obtain insights into cultural elements that ruled their discourse. The findings show that for this diasporic community that was slowly losing its language, ethnic identity can still be found in their cultural practices. Women were seen as keepers of tradition and customs that are important to the community. They followed certain cultural and traditional practices in their homes: practiced vegetarianism while cooking and serving food in their homes, followed taboos regarding food preparation, maintained patriarchal practices especially in religious practices and lived in extended families which usually included paternal grandparents. Malaysian Iyer women are seen to continue with the traditional roles given to women of the community.

Keywords: Ethnic identity, language and women, women and tradition

1. INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Iyers are a small community of Tamil Brahmins who live and work mainly in the Klang Valley. They are upwardly mobile and place great emphasis on education but at the same time, value their traditions and culture (Sankar, 2005). Sankar found that the Malaysian Iyers had shifted largely to the English language for economic and social reasons.

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The Malaysian Iyers, who are the subject of this study, are Tamil speakers who form part of the larger Tamil population in Malaysia. They form a distinct socio-cultural group known as Brahmins¹ with respect to their dialectal variety of Tamil known as Iyer² or Brahmin Tamil (Bright and Ramanujam, 1981: 2; Karunakaran and Sivashanmugam, 1981: 59; Varma, 1989: 188). They live in closely-knit networks established through migration patterns and kinship ties (Sankar, 2005).

The Malaysian Iyers are categorized under 'Tamils' and comprise about 0.09% of the Indian population in Malaysia. The approximate size of the Malaysian Iyer population was determined at approximately 1000 people, based on interviews with senior members of the community.

The Malaysian Iyers originate from India. The Iyers started migrating to Malaysia from the early decades of the 20th century in order to seek economic prosperity and to take advantage of the migration policy that existed during the British colonial days (personal interviews: elders of the community). There were several reasons cited by elders of the community for leaving India, such as the Dravidian Nationalist Movement in Tamil Nadu (Arooran, 1980; Irschick, 1986), the economic drudgery of their lives and the need to improve their lot in life, and to join family members. Some of the elders interviewed said that they came to work as employees of Indian companies that had established branches in Malaysia. An association called the Brahmana Samajam Malaysia (BSM) was formed in 1954 for the promotion and practice of their culture and religion in Malaysia (Sankar, 2005).

1.1 Research Objectives

Sankar's (2005) study had established a language shift away from the Tamil language. However, the study also found religion and culture is maintained despite the shift away from the mother tongue. In this study, the objective is to look for markers of identity when the mother tongue shifts to other languages. Sankar's study made a mention of the home domain as an important area for maintenance of religion and culture. This study aimed to explore the role of women in maintaining cultural identity as women are often seen as guardians of the home. To study this objective further, the following specific objectives were set:

1. To study the roles that Malaysian Iyer women adopt and play as daughters, daughters-in-law, wives and mothers.

¹Saraswathy (1996) says the word 'Brahmin' is taken from the four fold caste system where Indian society is divided into economic divisions. The original philosophy of the caste system comes from the Bhagavad Gita. The Brahmins formed the priestly class who delved into philosophy and the maintenance of temples. The caste system that exists among Indians today is no longer based on the original idea of grouping society according to their job functions. According to Varma (1989), castes are maintained along hereditary lines today.

²The word 'Iyer' refers to one of the two Tamil Brahmin groups. The word 'Iyer' is commonly used among Tamils to mean a temple priest. Iyer Tamil refers to the dialectal variety spoken by Iyers.

2. To identify the rituals that the Malaysian Iyer women conform to and adopt in their lives.
3. To identify the markers of the Malaysian Iyer community.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this section, a number of studies related to women and their roles in the culture of their societies is explored in order to study and provide a background on the role of the Malaysian Iyer women. Societal attitudes to women from time immemorial have relegated women to, at best, a position complementary to men and, at worst, secondary and subservient to men (Basanti Devi, 2003). Literature often depicts women negatively as physical entities of beauty or as sex objects portrayed in a derogatory linguistic representation (Swilla, 2000). The following paragraphs study the place of women in different cultural contexts, so that we can place the Iyer women of this study in a more global context.

2.1 Cultural and Traditional Values Placed on Women

In India, literature dating back to hundreds of years have traditionally placed blame on women for various natural occurrences such as the death of a husband (being the fault of his wife as she is inauspicious), inability to conceive (seen as a curse brought on a family by a daughter-in-law) or even sudden financial difficulties faced by a family (seen as the bad luck caused by the daughter-in-law)(Basanti Devi, 2003). In Tanzania, women are portrayed as despicable and evil who will siphon off men's health and wealth. In their short stories, women are shown in stark black or white terms, usually in a position unequal and weaker to men. Women are further seen as seductresses on whom sexual aggression is justified (Swilla, 2000).

In Bangladesh, Sultana (2011) revealed the plight of elderly women in a strict patriarchal system that seldom pays attention to the problems faced by women. Elderly women suffer from ailments such as arthritis, nerve disorders and back pain who seldom receive any medical attention. The situation arises due to several reasons such as poverty, lack of government involvement in the care of the elderly and the patriarchal system which places women's issues at the bottom of the pile. Ismail (2010) reported that Pakistani women too face a 'glass ceiling' in workplaces that prevent them from moving beyond a certain level to managerial positions.

The values placed on women stem from obedience to the husband (Husanova and Utarova, 2000), ability to produce male children (Basanti Devi, 2003) and the ability to take instructions in her new household (Imamura, 1990). These findings are very revealing about how cultural norms tend to give women a secondary position to men in many cultures that stretch from countries in the African continent to those in the Asian continent. Even in western nations, Christian wedding ceremonies traditionally have used the words 'man and wife' to describe the couple joined in a marriage ceremony. This phrase emphasizes the unequal power relationship between the genders because while the male is given a persona, the female is given a role which defines her in relation to a man (Bate and Bowker, 1997:102).

While the earlier description of position of women may hold true in some parts of the world, Kasi (2013) argues that the roles played by women, especially Indian women, as role models for the family cannot be underplayed as they are responsible for the well-being of their children. In recent times, Indian women have taken to cottage industries in order to supplement family income or in some instances, be the breadwinner. The development of the sericulture cottage industry in India is a success due to the diligence of women. They can be relied upon to work diligently as they take their roles as breadwinners and carers of their family very seriously. He argues that the role of women in community-based projects can either make the project a success or a failure.

French (2010) concurs as her work on the Mayan people found that the Mayan women felt the strongest sense of cultural responsibility to transmit their values to future generations. This gendered responsibility of reproducing traditional culture is attributed to the intrinsic moral strength of Mayan women.

Collier (2006) in her study of Senegalese women in the United States found that unique trade and cultural practices that occur within African hair braiding shops may serve as a maintenance model for future immigrant groups. Migrant women from Africa were resourceful in navigating the two worlds where linguistic and diverse cultural identity allow them to learn the host language while maintaining native cultural practices at the same time.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, a framework called 'The Ethnography of Communication' was used. This theory provides the framework for analyzing information that is not necessarily language-based but also information based on the culture and ethnography of a community.

The ethnography of a community refers to the analysis of communication within the wider social and cultural practices and the belief systems of a particular cultural or ethnic group. It was proposed by Hymes (1977) as an approach towards analyzing speech patterns within a speech community. This was proposed to accommodate non-vocal and non-verbal characteristics of communication especially when one is concerned with the way in which a speech event fits into the whole cultural belief system; then we may find that we are describing things that are external to the talk (Cameron, 2001).

Using this framework, it is possible to show that while the domain analysis of language is capable of providing a macro picture of language maintenance and language shift, and code-switches tell us more about individual language choice, neither method facilitates an examination of what is said or meant beyond the words used in communication. Language maintenance and language shift should be investigated beyond what is said because different societies speak differently. These differences reflect different societal values and norms (Wierzbicka, 1994). In this study, the objectives were to investigate maintenance of cultural identity in a community that has shifted away from its mother tongue. A study of the ethnography of communication will aid in finding answers to this research objective. The following paragraphs explain the theory.

3.1 Shared Community Norms

Community differences make a difference to the ethnography of communication because 'every society has a shared set of norms' (Wierzbicka, 1994:83) which only they understand. These differences can lead to very different 'expectations and rights among speakers' (Gumperz, 1982:12). If one wants to know the reasons why people shift from one language to another, then one needs to be aware of the rules that govern speaking in the second language (Bamgbose, 1995). To achieve native-like competence in a second language, one has to shift from one's native culture to the culture of the second language; otherwise, there is bound to be interference in communication.

However, if one were to acquire a second language, it can disrupt the basics achieved in the first language. This can result in bilinguals losing a part of themselves in the process of acquiring another language because membership to a community makes language functional for communication (Ehlich, 1994:115). This then brings about the question of language as a measure of one's identity. Researchers such as Pandaripande (1992) found no co-relation between loss of language and loss of identity in her study of language shift in India. David (2001:194) found similar results with the Malaysian Sindhis. She stated that 'the Malaysian Sindhis...fiercely proud of their ethnicity.....do not appear to see language maintenance as critical for the preservation of their culture and identity'. Therefore, the fear that the acquisition of a second (or third) language could erode one's ability in the first language needs to be investigated although some research shows, as seen above, that identity is not necessarily affected in the process of acquiring a second language.

3.2 Societal Rules of Interaction and Interpretation

Variation in a community's speech patterns can sometimes hinder proper communication of the speaker's intentions. Communicative intent could sometimes be unsuccessful due to a lack of understanding of the speech patterns used by the speakers. This is because the cultural background of the speakers plays a role in communicative patterns (Clyne, 1994). In order to understand differences or variations in communicative intent, a 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1977:60) is required. Communicative competence refers broadly to the acquisition of the ability to understand the grammatical system of a language as well as the system of its use such as the attitudes and beliefs regarding language use. A member of a community has communicative competence when 'he is able to participate in it as a communicative member' (Hymes, 1977:61).

The above views do not mean that communication across different communities is possible. Cross-cultural communication is made possible because a 'universal conversational contract' (Keesing, 1994:4) makes such communication possible to be understood despite the differences in culture. Guibernau and Rex (2010:77) further stated that global society has reached an age of 'universal high culture' where people should be able to move from place to place and communicate easily with ease wherever they are despite cultural and other differences. Therefore, this replaces all other forms of high culture of previous times. A man's education is by far his most precious investment and therefore in effect, confers him his identity.

Each community will attach specific behaviours and proprieties to speaking. These may be considered as the unwritten rules which govern speaking. Rules on appropriate behaviour during speech events such as one should not interrupt or one may do so freely and turn-taking rules will be enforced by the community during interactions (Hymes, 1977). Part of communicative competence is the understanding of such rules or traditions of the community.

Rules of interaction can be understood when a community's socio-cultural practices are investigated (Hymes, 1977). Interpretation of a community's speech patterns would depend on the belief system of a community. The communicative competence of a community should include the understanding of the rules of interaction and interpretation of community values. When a community shifts from its ethnic language to another more dominant language for reasons of survival and economic necessity, they do not lose their identity completely. Part of a community's communicative strategies includes what is said and done within a framework of cultural knowledge because what is said and done has meaning only within such a context. Schiffrin (1994:185) explains this well when she says:

The ways that we organize and conduct our lives through language are thus ways of being and doing that are not only relative to other possibilities for communicating, but also deeply embedded within the particular framework by which we – as members of our own specific communities – make sense out of experience.

An understanding of the rules of communication that exist within each community is important to interpreting them. Rules regarding face-saving devices such as non-confrontation and avoidance of a direct affront can be found in some communities such as the Vakinankaratra of Madagascar (Keenan, 1974:126). Other customs such as visiting neighbours daily just to check that all is well exists with some people in Iceland (Coulthard, 1985:56), politeness and power strategies to maintain privilege among church leaders (Pearson, 1988), expressing social status through different modes of greeting (Irvine, 1974) and direct confrontation strategies among Arabs (Watson and Graves as cited in Coulthard, 1985) exist among different ethnic communities. Therefore, without a clear understanding of the underlying rules of each community's social norms, it will be difficult to interpret language use.

It is important to have an understanding of the community's socio-cultural practices as these will give insight into the community's value system. The Malaysian Iyers' social and cultural practices were studied to gather better insights on their motivation to preserve their cultural identity and the role that women play as keepers of language and culture.

4. METHODOLOGY

Fifty (50) families were visited to observe traditional practices found in Malaysian Iyer homes and to document markers of their identity, if any. In addition, conversations among 30 women in various situations occurring naturally was selected for analysis, aided through participant observation. The families, homes and women were selected through phone calls made to various members of the community with the help of the

Brahmana Samajam Malaysia's Directory of Members. They were chosen based on their willingness to be visited, audiotaped and observed.

4.1 Research Approach

Information derived from the observation of intra-community interaction and audiotaped conversations that involved the roles of women were studied to obtain insights into discourse involving women so that cultural elements (if any) that ruled such discourse could be studied. Qualitative research techniques were employed to analyze the dynamics of language use among the subjects, so that cultural norms practiced by the community could be better understood. Three qualitative approaches were used:

1. Visits to homes – This method aided in recording the cultural markers of a Malaysian Iyer home.
2. Observation of intra-community interaction – The observation techniques aided with the interpretation of conversational non-verbal communication.
3. Audiotaped conversations – This technique aided in obtaining information from women on the roles and rituals observed by them in the maintenance of their cultural identity.

4.2 Data Collection

The sample studied is a small and close-knit urban community. Access to the community was facilitated by the fact that the researcher is a member of this community. Data collection for this study was facilitated through 50 home visits and the audiotaping of 30 women in conversation with one another at community functions or in their homes. Participant observation aided in documenting non-verbal data which could be observed. These three approaches for collecting data aided in documenting traditions and customs practiced by the community and the roles that women played in maintaining their cultural identity. The data collected enabled a study of the ethnography of communication (made possible through home visits, audiotaped conversations and participant observation of social discourse between community members).

4.2.1 Home Visits

The researcher made 50 home visits. These visits were made solely to qualitatively assess any commonalities that could be found across the homes visited so that they could be documented as a marker of an Iyer home. These observations were limited to documenting any physical markers that occurred consistently over several homes.

4.2.2 Observations

Observations were made on the Malaysian Iyer community through home visits and audiotaping in authentic and natural situations so that the physical markers of an Iyer home could be documented and the roles and rituals that the women of the community play in order to maintain their cultural identity were noted down. Participant observations were made personally by the researcher during home visits and during audiotaping so that the findings could be triangulated. During these visits and conversations, the researcher took part in the conversations that were being carried out. Personal observations and the taped conversations were documented

from the field notes and the audiotapes. In order to understand customs and practices observed by this community, visits were made to the 50 homes in the Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya areas, where they were mostly concentrated. As a member of the community, the researcher found that access to members' homes was not difficult.

As the main aim of the observations was to obtain ethnographic information about the community, the researcher visited the homes with an open mind to firstly observe commonalities in the way the homes appeared or were managed. Once these personal observations were made and many commonalities were observed especially with regard to how the kitchen was managed and religious altars were maintained, further enquiries were made with reference to socio-cultural patterns such as joint/extended family arrangements and patriarchy so that patterns could be seen.

4.2.3 Audiotaping

The sample for the audiotaped conversations consisted of 30 women who were taped at their homes and at social functions such as weddings, dinner parties and a community outing (the researcher accompanied members of the Malaysian Iyer community on a three-day holiday retreat to the seaside holiday resort of Port Dickson so that community interactions could be studied). For a list of venues and occasions for both audiotaping and observation, see Tables 1a and 1b.

Table 1a. Functions attended for observation and audiotaping

Function	Number
Interactions in the home (home domain)	9
Interactions at social functions (social domain)	3
Interactions at religious functions (religious domain)	4
Total	16

Table 1b. Sample description

Sample description	Role	Number
First generation	Mother, mother-in law, wife, grandmother	7
Second generation	Mother, wife, daughter-in-law, daughter	15
Third generation	Daughter, granddaughter	8
Total		30

4.3 Analysis of Data

4.3.1 The Matrix Language Frame (MLF) Model and the Ethnography of Communication using the SPEAKING Grid

In order to interpret the functional uses of the Tamil language, code-switches from English to Tamil were studied. In order to do that, conversations were separated

into matrix language and embedded language using Myers-Scotton's MLF Model (1993). The MLF was used as a device to separate the languages that were used in a conversation.

Matrix language refers to the main language used in utterances while embedded language refers to the language that plays the lesser role. The basic premise is to establish the hierarchy of two or more languages used in a single conversation. When the frequency of morphemes in a language is more than another language, then that language is the matrix language. The embedded language is another language that is chosen by the speaker to use together with the dominant or matrix language in one conversation exchange. Once the conversations were separated into matrix or dominant and intrusive or embedded language, they were analyzed using the Ethnography of Speaking Model (Hymes, 1977).

Cultural values that are retained depend on the perceptions of the people under study and the social and cultural environment in which they exist. Therefore, the process of research in this study is data driven where patterns of cultural observances were derived from the data collected. Generally when dealing in non-numerical data, 'usually linguistic units in oral or written form', a qualitative approach is used (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:201). Thus, this approach was selected for the purpose of attempting to find the roles women adopted in maintaining their cultural practices.

For the purposes of this paper, the data was studied using Hymes Ethnography of Communication and the SPEAKING grid (Hymes, 1977; Schiffrin, 1994). Table 2 shows how the SPEAKING grid is used for analyzing data in this study; the components for describing speech are shown mnemonically in the table.

Table 2. SPEAKING grid

S	Setting Scene	physical circumstances subjective definition of an occasion
P	Participants	speaker/sender/addressor hearer/receiver/audience/addressee
E	Ends	purposes and goals outcomes
A	Act sequence	message form and content
K	Key	tone, manner
I	Instrumentalities	channel (verbal, non-verbal, physical) forms of speech drawn from community repertoire
N	Norms	of interaction and interpretation specific proprieties attached to speaking interpretation of norms within cultural belief system
G	Genre	textual categories

Source: Schiffrin (1994:142)

An ethnography of communication using all of the above techniques is capable of revealing information about the physical setting and scene of the speech act (S), the speakers or participants (P), the purposes or goals of the speech act (E), the form and content of the message (A), the non-verbal communication techniques used (K), the forms of speech (I), the norms of interaction and interpretation (N) and the genre (G) of the speech act. Any movements or shifts in any one of the components of speaking can signal that a community speaking rule is present. For example, a shift from a normal tone to a whisper, from formal language to slang, correction, praise, embarrassment, withdrawal, evaluative responses, etc. could in fact mean that a rule of speaking is being observed.

5. FINDINGS

The following sections outline the roles that women play in the Malaysian Iyer community. An important part of the Iyer identity lies with the customs and traditions that they practice. In Sankar's (2005) study, the majority of participants (43%) looked upon culture and tradition as an important part of their lives. Observations of Iyer homes revealed several customs and traditions that formed an important part of their identity. Women had roles to play in these customs and traditions.

5.1 Customs and Traditions

Important customary practices of the Malaysian Iyers are outlined in the following sections. Personal observations made during home visits aided the writing of this section. Table 3 summarizes these observations.

Table 3. Observations during home visits

Features observed	Count
<i>Tulasi maadam</i>	50
<i>Kolam</i>	37
Prayer altar	50
Vegetarianism	45
Extended family	41

5.1.1 Practices Found in Malaysian Iyer Homes

Traditional practices are an integral part of a community's identity. Fifty (50) home visits were made to ascertain the practice of traditions. During home visits, the researcher found some features in the homes visited. These are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Outside the house, somewhere in the front porch, there is a *tulasi* (basil plant) *maadam* (a square concrete structure in which the *tulasi* plant grows). The *tulasi maadam* has an aperture in the front for a lighted lamp to be housed. In the evening, the lamp is normally lit by the lady of the house. Elders explained this tradition as homage paid to a plant that has come to be revered as it is supposed to have several medicinal properties.

The entrance to a Malaysian Iyer home is usually decorated with a *kolam*. A *kolam* is a hand drawn artwork made of either dried rice flour or a wet rice batter that is worked by hand with a small roll of cotton wool. Colouring is sometimes added for beauty. The *kolam* is drawn by the lady of the home, her daughter or daughter-in-law. This feature is drawn daily in some homes and weekly in others. It serves as both a decoration of the home as well as a bird and ant feed.

Each of the 50 Malaysian Iyer homes visited had an elaborate prayer altar. Most homes had a room assigned for the prayer altar while others set aside space in some part of the house for conducting prayers. The prayer room or altar had pictures of various deities. Some homes had small statues of Hindu gods and goddesses. In the centre of the altar is a *kuttu vilakku* which is a decorative lamp made of silver or brass. The lamp was placed on a *kolam*. The *kuttu vilakku* is cleaned and decorated with *chandanam* (sandalwood paste) and *kumkumam* (a reddish powder made of tumeric powder and lime). A wick made of cotton wool is placed in a recessed part of the lamp which is filled with coconut or sesame oil. The *kuttu vilakku* is lit in the mornings and evenings by the lady of the house. The lady also prepares offerings while the man of the house makes the ritual offering. In all of the 50 homes visited, the hosts reported that incense, flowers and food are offered twice a day, with prayers recited in Tamil and/or Sanskrit.

On leaving a Malaysian Iyer home, married Hindu women are offered *kumkumam* which is placed as a dot in the centre of the forehead. This decorative dot is called *pottu* or *tilakam* and is regarded as a sign of *sowbagya* or the auspiciousness of the married state. On leaving the host's home, the guest is invited to partake of the *kumkumam*. Elders explained that in Iyer heritage, a woman is feted for her auspiciousness when in the married state and thus the state of *sowbagya* is celebrated.

5.1.2 Vegetarianism

In all the homes visited, vegetarianism was followed. In five homes visited, eggs were consumed but the rest did not cook with eggs. This tradition was followed in the homes visited though a few said that they ate some meat outside the home, but never brought meat into their homes. The kitchen of most homes visited had stainless steel utensils, plates, glasses, serving dishes and spoons. The kitchen appeared to be the preserve of the women of the home and few men participated in the preparation of food.

5.2 Patriarchy and Extended Families

In most homes visited, children were expected to obey and respect their parents. The community practiced a patriarchal system. The eldest son is expected to care for his aged parents. Unmarried sons and daughters lived with their parents. Unmarried women lived with their parents and upon their demise lived with their brothers (see Table 4). Men conducted religious rites while the women provided the support services such as preparing the prasadam (food offerings) during religious ceremonies. Sons conducted death rites for parents while daughters and wives took care of all food preparations and played a secondary role in providing support.

Table 4 shows the popularity of the extended family system in the 50 homes that

were visited. Of the 50 homes visited, 40% had unmarried working children living at home, 34% had parents living with them and 8% had unmarried siblings living within the household. Only 18% of the homes visited consisted of nuclear families.

Table 4. Diagrammatic representation of the percentage of extended families living under one roof

Extended families (types of family members living within household)			Nuclear families	Total
Number of families with unmarried working children living with parents	Number of families with parents living with married son	Number of families with unmarried siblings living with a married brother	Parents and children only	
20(40%)	17(34%)	4(8%)	9(18%)	50

5.3 Respect for Elders

Respect for elders is common and traditionally, elders are given respect in several ways. Reverence to elders is shown by seeking their blessings when one prostrates at their feet. One does not sit when an elder is standing, nor does one cross one's legs in front of them or show disrespect for them by challenging them openly in any way, even when a point is being disputed.

Elders are addressed politely as *mama* or *mami* (uncle or aunt). The respectful term in Tamil '*neengal*' (a respectful 'you') rather than '*nee*' (which is 'you' when referring to peers) is used when addressing them. This tradition was seen to be practiced by the women who participated in the study. Elders expect and receive deference and respect in several ways. The acts of showing respect were obvious during community interactions. The following examples show how respect is shown in interactions with older people. Older women in the groups always expected and received respect in several ways. They were always addressed respectfully, language spoken was changed or shifted to the ethnic language if an older person who did not know English or Malay joined in and open confrontation with an older person was never conducted so that the older person could save 'face'.

5.3.1 Use of Mama and Mami instead of their Names

When addressing elders who are not related to the speaker, the respectful terms *mama* or uncle and *mami* or aunty is used. The use of their names shows distance and disrespect. Excerpt 1 shows how *mami* is used.

9. J: It depends on who you are talking to – if I am speaking to some *mami* or to *padma*, then I have a tendency to talk more in Tamil. Otherwise, I find it easier to talk in English.

Excerpt 1

The speaker, a second-generation woman, was having a conversation with a few other second-generation women. She compares *padma* (a term for a friend of the same generation) to *mami* (a generic term for older women). In Excerpt 2, a younger second generation woman refers to an older first-generation woman by the term *mami*.

3. S: *Mami, neenga enna ninaikirel?*
What do you think, Aunty?
(translation in bold)

Excerpt 2

7. A: I think what *Mami* says is true.
Aunty
(translation in bold)

Excerpt 3

33. R: Except that *Mami* thinks we should maintain it properly.
Aunty
43. R: You know I was speaking to one *Mama* and *Mami*
Uncle Aunty
the other day and they were telling me.....
(translation in bold)

Excerpt 4

In the two examples above, a younger person was addressing an older person. In Excerpt 4, *Mama* and *Mami* refer to an elderly couple. Apparently their status as an elderly couple matters more than who they really are, because the younger person talks of the advice they gave and because they were elders, their advice should be considered.

5.3.2 *Use of Neengal and not Nee*

The Tamil word for 'you' is used in two ways: a respectful '*neengal*' and a casual '*nee*'. Whenever elders in the community were addressed, then the respectful *neengal* was used. Excerpts 5 and 6 show the use of *neengal* while Excerpts 7 and 8 show the use of *nee*.

1. S: *Neengal enna ninaikirel?*
What do you think?
(translation in bold)

Excerpt 5

In Excerpt 5, a second-generation woman of 30 asks a first-generation woman of 65, her opinion on a matter using the respectful term for you – *neengal*. In Excerpt 6, a second-generation woman asks two first-generation women how they arrived, using the respectful *neengal*. She asks once in English and once in Tamil since one elder can speak English and the other cannot, further establishing respect for the elder who cannot speak English. Switching from English to the ethnic language of Tamil is also seen as a form of politeness extended to those who cannot speak English.

1.S: *Mami, you came by bus? Neengal ellam bus-la vanthella?*
Did you come by bus?
 (translation in bold)

Excerpt 6

54. T: *Urundai ah? Enga athukku vanthu paarungo. Nee pannuvai illaiya?*
Round is it? Come and see in my house. Do you make it too?
 (translation in bold)

Excerpt 7

In the same conversation (Excerpt 7), the first-generation woman who was addressed as *neengal*, now addresses a second-generation younger woman as *nee*. In Excerpt 8, a first-generation woman is asked if she plays cards by a second-generation woman with the respectful *neengal*. The first-generation woman answers her with the casual *nee*. However, it is important to note that the younger woman takes no offense at being addressed as *nee* as those are the norms of address; an elder expects and gets respect, a younger person does not. She answers in English knowing that the older woman is bilingual. The older woman continues the conversation in English with the second-generation woman and changes to Tamil only when another first-generation woman who cannot speak English joins the group.

34. S: *Mami, neengal cards villaiyadarathu illaiya?*
Aunty, don't you play cards?
 35. A: *Nekkum cardskum romba thooram. Nee vilaiyaduvaya?*
Definitely not! Do you play?
 36. S: Yes. It's very easy *Mami*.
Aunty
 (translation in bold)

Excerpt 8

5.3.3 Avoidance of Open Confrontation

When arguing a point with someone who is much older, open confrontation is avoided as a face-saving grace for the elder as seen in Excerpts 9, 10 and 11. Elders take it upon

themselves to give advice and expect that they not be crossed. Even when a younger person disagrees, the opposing point of view is not made directly.

6. M: *Intha kaalathu naakareegam naala, English-le-pesara. Velila pona ellam English upayogama irukku. Aana, namma bashaiyai namba padichi thaan aahanum.*

They speak English because it is modern to do so. If you go out, English is very useful. But, we have to learn our own language.

8. J: *Tamizhyo Englishyo, athu language ...*

Tamil or English, whichever language ...

9. R: *Illai appadinu illai. Sila per aathule..... En kuzhanthaikalai ye pathukongolen. Shoba vanthu Tamizh.....*

No its not quite like that. In some people's houses... just take my children for instance. Shoba's Tamil....

(translation in bold)

Excerpt 9

In Excerpt 9, a first-generation woman M is taking it upon herself to lecture the two younger second-generation women on how to maintain Tamil at home and how she and her son have done it successfully. The younger second-generation woman J begins with a point that the older R thinks might be an inappropriate comment to M and so stops her halfway and relates something about her own home. Both second-generation women do not agree with the first generation woman but do not want her to lose face nor do they want to seem disrespectful. They don't openly tell her she is wrong. Instead, they provide examples about their experiences to make their point without telling the older woman that her views don't always work. Excerpt 10 shows another example of avoiding open confrontation.

10. K: I will say, "Om buvar buva swaha" ten times even

Sanskrit prayer

when I am driving because that's the only free time I get sometimes.

12. AR: *Namma ellarume azhnthu sinthikka vendiyathu enna endraal, Mami sonnathu maathiri Brahmanana Pirapathu arithu arithu maaninava pirappathu arithu athanidam arithu manitharaha pirapathu. Manithanaha pirapathai vida Brahmanana pirappathu arithu. Aana ethina Brahmanarkalsamprathayathai kadapidikavaarkal enbathuthaan theriyavillai.....*

What we have to think about very deeply is like the mami said, that to be born as a human being is a high birth. To be born as a Brahmin in a human birth is an even higher achievement. However, how many Brahmins actually follow the code of conduct is unclear.....

(translation in bold)

Excerpt 10

In Excerpt 10, both K as well as AR are first-generation women. K is the older person though AR, while being younger, is better read in the scriptures. AR wants to tell K that as a Brahmin, she has a caste duty to perform certain prayers. However, since she does not want to offend the older K, she first agrees with her and then she uses a roundabout manner about what a Brahmin birth means and that there are duties attached to that birth, and that one does not immediately assume superiority if they do not perform their caste duties.

8. S: Not enough money and for our community requirements it is not necessary at all.
10. K: I think, the building can also be multifunctional. It can be used for propagating dance and other activities that our community is interested in.
14. S: Now tell me honestly how many of us take part in games? Very minimal. From my 73 years of life, how many of us take part in such activities?
15. K: We did not have a common venue.
16. S: It doesn't matter whether we have a hall or not.
19. K: What if we don't confine it to our community?
20. S: Open it up. That's what I have been telling earlier. If the intention is to rent out the hall, generate some income, yes I agree. If we don't generate any income, putting the whole funds into it, whatever we have just for two or three times a month – it's not worth it. All we require is a hall with attached facilities.

Excerpt 11

In Excerpt 11, three first-generation women and one much younger second-generation woman were having a conversation about whether the community needs a hall or not. One elder S thinks it is a waste of money. The younger woman K tries to politely show her that the hall could be put to several uses. However, S is not convinced though all the others appear to agree with K and makes it a point to bring her age in to show that she has more experience than the younger S. K then gives S a face-saving way out by making a suggestion. S takes it up by saying that that is what she has been saying all along, even though she was not!

5.4 Rites and Rituals

Some functions such as the *navarathri* celebrations which last nine days are celebrated in many Malaysian Iyer homes. Married women are offered *manjal kumkumam* (a red powder made from sandalwood powder and tumeric denoting auspiciousness of the married state) by the hostess who decorates her house with an elaborate nine-step structure (*kolu*) with many statues of deities arranged on each step.

The yearly changing of the *poonal* (the holy thread worn by Brahmin men) or *avani avittam* is another important ritual. This function is carried out in the Brahmana Samajam premises every year. Ladies of the community get together and organize a vegetarian meal for those present while the resident priest organizes the changing of the holy thread. Men who have been initiated through the *upanayam* (initiation into

the Brahmin clans) ceremony wear this holy thread and change it during the yearly *avani avittam*.

A death in the family of a community member is usually a rallying point for all members of the community who turn up without invitation. While the men of the community take over the organization of the death rites, the women comfort the bereaved family and prepare meals for them for up to 12 days. This is due to a period of mourning observed by the bereaved family, when they are not allowed to cook during the first 12 days of a family member's death (Ayyar, 1998).

Ceremonies such as weddings and *upanayanams* (where a male child is initiated as a Brahmin) tend to be a celebration for all members of the community as many aid in the conduct of these ceremonies. The decoration of the wedding hall with *kolam*, the wedding dais, the dressing of the bride and groom, etc. are usually taken care of by community members. Provision of drinks and sweetmeats during the ceremonies are made possible by ladies of the community while young girls and boys serve these refreshments to those present.

In much of the observations made of this community, it appears that the women of the Malaysian Iyer community are keepers of traditional and social practices associated with the community and they take on this role seriously.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Sometimes even when a community shifts away from its ethnic language due to economic pressures, their traditional customs are retained (Asmah, as cited in David, 2001). Therefore, an understanding of a community's cultural practices can aid in analyzing the ethnography of communication. The objective of this study was to study the markers of the Malaysian Iyer community and the roles that women played in maintaining cultural identity and the rituals women adhered to. The Iyer traditions are based on several customs and rituals that mark them as a community. The following sections answer the research objectives.

6.1 Roles Played by Women

6.1.1 Adherence to Patriarchy

This study shows that women adhered to the Iyer customs and traditions by playing a role that was supplementary to that of men, thereby keeping to their patriarchal traditions. They were not the main observers of religious rituals but were helpers in the production of food and making the preparations for all religious ceremonies. Their role was thus confined to that of a helper to the male of the home.

6.1.2 Extended Family Tradition

Daughters-in-law accepted their parents-in-law into an extended family system that included their parents-in-law and any unmarried sibling of their husbands. The system of the extended family unit was prevalent in most of the homes visited.

6.1.3 Keepers of the Vegetarian Tradition

Women of the community kept their kitchens strictly vegetarian; even those who ate

meat reported that they would not bring it into their kitchens. This is to keep the house untainted by meat so that religious traditions could be conducted in the home and food prepared in a kitchen that did not serve meat.

6.1.4 Maintenance of the Home within the Iyer Tradition

Women decorated their homes with a *kolam*, grew a *tulasi* plant and maintained a prayer altar where food offerings were made at least once a day. This was in keeping with traditions that were observed from generation to generation.

6.2 Rituals Observed by Women

6.2.1 The Sowbagya Tradition

Respondents to this study showed an adherence to the *sowbagya* tradition where a woman was revered for her marital status. This was observed by the offering of *kunkumam* (vermillion offering) to married women who visited their homes and the veneration of the married state. Widows were not given this status.

6.2.2 Helpers of their Husbands during Religious Functions

Wives of the community aided their husbands (who performed religious functions) through the preparation of *prasadam*s (food offerings) and by being an aide in the conduct of the ceremonies. This is an adherence to the patriarchal system where men conduct religious ceremonies while women tended to the kitchen duties.

6.2.3 Helpers during Community Functions

The women of this community rallied around one another during functions such as the *upanayanam*, weddings and other ceremonies by helping in all areas that needed help; not only with food preparation but also by aiding the priest, getting the bride and groom ready and having flowers ready for prayer offerings.

6.3 Cultural Markers of the Iyer Community

6.3.1 The Home

The Iyer home had traditional prayer altars, *tulasi* plants and *kolam* decorations. An elder of the community said that one of the ways in which they identified homes of Iyers was the presence of a *tulasi maadam* outside the home.

6.3.2 Brahminism

The community is from the Brahmin caste and thus observed rules regarding the conduct of religious rituals, the wearing of the holy thread (*poonal*) and the adherence to the vedic traditions (see footnote 1 on page 1.).

6.3.3 The Vegetarian Tradition

The Iyers were vegetarian and seldom ate meat. The concept of vegetarianism practiced by an Iyer is that a Brahmin's virtue is to subsist by destroying nature the least (Mr. Lakshmanan, priest). The principle is one that is recommended in the Bhagavad Gita (Saraswathy, 1996) and states that one should eat what is suitable for fulfilling one's duties. The Iyers come from the traditional Brahmin caste which involves priestly

duties, philosophy and other duties involving knowledge. The Bhagavad Gita asks Brahmins to abstain from meat.

6.3.4 Dress

The traditional dress of the Iyer community was only obvious during the wedding ceremonies, death rites and *upanayanam* ceremonies. The married women wore a 9-yard sari called the *madisar* while the married men wore a dhoti that was 6 yards called the *veshtadai*.

In conclusion, from the findings of the above study, it appears that language alone is not an indicator of ethnic identity. Other parameters such as customs and traditions play a role in providing identity to an individual. In the case of the Malaysian Iyer community, even though they have shifted largely to the English language and spoke Tamil functionally to retain cultural and religious lexical items (Sankar, 2005), they do not feel that their ethnic identity is lost. They are able to retain their identity through their dress, food, rites, rituals and customary practices. Hindu lifecycle ceremonies and customs prescribed in Ayyar's '*South Indian Customs*' (1998) are practiced by Malaysian Iyers. The presence of relatives and the extended family ensures that many of the customs are adhered to while the close-knit nature of the community assures interaction, help, advice and attendance at various ceremonies that are conducted.

Fishman (1989) in a discussion on ethnic identity says that two factors potentially give identity to people other than language. One is patrimony (cultural practices) and the other is patriarchy (birthright). In the case of the Malaysian Iyers, even though they are in the process of losing their ethnic language, they are able to retain their ethnic identity through their religious and cultural practices. The women of this community play a large role as keepers of customs and traditions both in their own homes and within the community at large.

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Gatekeeping in the Coverage of Interethnic Conflicts: An Analysis of Mainstream and Alternative Newspapers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Ethnicity, religion and related issues have always proved to be a difficult topic for reporting in multicultural societies. This study examined the gatekeeping process undertaken by Malaysian newspapers in reporting interethnic conflicts. The gatekeeping theory was employed as the theoretical framework. Interviews with editors from the mainstream and alternative newspapers found that gatekeeping took place at the individual, routine, and organizational as well as institutional levels. Significantly, two newspapers owned by pro-government political parties – *Utusan* by UMNO and *The Star* by MCA – claimed that ownership had an impact on their gatekeeping decision. It was found that political reason was the primary external factor influencing the gatekeeping of the newspapers in their coverage of interethnic conflicts. This study indicates that journalists/editors shape a reality that reflects the political, economic and ideological boundaries within which they work. More importantly, gatekeeping was found to reflect a struggle between dominant social norms and efforts for change.

Keywords: Gatekeeping, interethnic conflicts, vernacular newspapers, alternative newspaper

1. INTRODUCTION

The last few years have seen a number of religious and ethnic tensions in Malaysia, which continue to impact on the lives of Malaysians from all walks of life. At the same time, Islam is increasingly becoming a major symbol of "Malay-ness" in Malaysia, in which faith is inseparable from the Malay ethno-cultural heritage. The division between Malays and non-Malays is widened by the religious divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, creating a distinct and acute awareness of the "other". This has resulted in the aggravation of the interethnic fracture of Malaysian society (Neo, 2006; Ooi, 2006).

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Ethnicity, religion and related issues have always proved to be a difficult topic for reporting in multicultural societies (Mustafa, 2010), where stories on ethnicity or religion are routinely judged and framed by the media to, albeit inadvertently, misrepresent and disrespect the essence of what adherents of different faiths/ethnic groups believe in. Stories on religion/ethnicity do provide the fuel for prolonged conflicts and even violence in societies that are historically divided by tribal and cultural rivalries. Mass communication is an important tool in the integration of societies because the media can act as change agents, which help to educate each subgroup and transform the traditionally segmented and divided society into a cohesive and integrated one where differences no longer become sources of conflict (Viswanath and Arora, 2000).

As a result of the nation's multi-ethnic and multilingual population, newspapers in Malaysia are published in different languages to cater to the respective major ethnic groups. There are currently 50 newspapers in Malaysia, and 16 of them are published in English, 13 in Bahasa Malaysia, 19 in Chinese and 2 in Tamil. Bahasa Malaysia dailies reach 46.5% of the Malaysian population, followed by English dailies (28.7%), Chinese dailies (24.1%) and Tamil dailies (0.7%).

An important characteristic of the vernacular newspapers in Malaysia is their tendency to concentrate on events important to their respective communities (Halimahton, Ngu and Raman, 2006; Mustafa, 2010). They also tend to play central roles in shaping the political and social reality for their ethnic groups because the editors and journalists of the vernacular newspapers are usually members of the community elite. While championing the interests of their groups, these vernacular newspapers undertake different approaches to problems because different ethnic groups in Malaysia are often times perceived to largely fall within differing bands of living standards and economic status (Ooi, 2006; Mansor, 2005).

Notably, Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak, proposed three roles for the media community during his opening speech at the 43rd International Convention of the World Chinese Language Press Institute. He called on the Chinese media to engage in the roles of: (1) promoter of moderation, (2) watch tower for change and (3) catalyst for development. Addressing the first role, Najib pointed out that the problem of extremism is not between the various religions but between the moderates and the extremists. In this regard, he highlighted that the media have a significant role to play in this quest for moderation because a more rational, secure and equitable world could be built with collective determination (*Sin Chew Daily*, 2010).

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aimed to examine the gatekeeping process undertaken by Malaysian newspapers in reporting interethnic conflicts. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the considerations of an editor in monitoring the coverage of interethnic conflicts?

RQ2: What are the newspaper policies regarding coverage of interethnic conflicts?

RQ3: How does ownership affect the gatekeeping of a newspaper in its coverage of interethnic conflicts?

RQ4: How do external factors (e.g. economic, politics and technology) influence the gatekeeping of a newspaper in its coverage of interethnic conflicts?

3. CONTROL OF MASS MEDIA IN MALAYSIA

Political scientists have categorized the Malaysian system as a “quasi democracy”, “semi democracy” or “modified democracy”. This implies that the political system perches uneasily between democracy and authoritarianism (Lee, 2002). Scholars have highlighted that media freedom in Malaysia is heavily curtailed by legislation and ownership (Netto, 2002; Wang, 2001; Zaharom, 2000). Various laws such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act, Internal Security Act, Official Secret Act, Sedition Act as well as the Multimedia and Broadcasting Act allow the government to impose prior restraints on publication, post-publication punishments and penalties for the acquisition of official information.

The structure of media ownership in Malaysia is directly and indirectly controlled by the government or government-linked individuals. *Radio Televisyen Malaysia* (RTM) has been owned and controlled by the government since its inception. Media Prima is an investment arm of UMNO and it owns *New Straits Times*, *Business Times*, *Malay Mail*, *Berita Harian*, *Harian Metro*, *Shin Min Daily News*, TV3, NTV7, 8TV, TV9, Fly FM and Hot FM. In addition, *Utusan Malaysia* and *Kosmo!* are published by Utusan Melayu (M) Berhad, which is also related to UMNO (Netto, 2002; Tan and Zawawi, 2008). The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) also control a substantial part of the mainstream media. MCA, through its official holding company, Huaren Holding Sdn Bhd, owns *The Star*, RedFM 104.9 and 988 (Tan and Zawawi, 2008). There are two Tamil newspapers in Malaysia – *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban* – and their ownership rests mainly in the hands of MIC president Samy Vellu and his wife (Brown, 2005; Wang, 2001).

Business tycoon Vincent Tan, a close associate of the former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and other leaders of *Barisan Nasional* (BN, National Front), owns *The Sun* and MiTV (Brown, 2005; Wang, 2001). On the other hand, the All Asia Television and Radio Company (ASTRO) is owned by Ananda Krishnan and Tunku Mahmud Besar Burhanuddin. It was also revealed that Krishnan has a close relationship with Mahathir and was therefore able to secure a media license (Brown, 2005).

McDaniel (2002) found that the Chinese-language newspapers in Malaysia are relatively more independent when compared to their Malay- and English-language counterparts. *Sin Chew Daily*, *Guang Ming Daily*, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *China Press* are owned by yet another business and media tycoon, Tiong Hiew King, while *Oriental Daily* is owned by Lau Hui Kang (Tan and Zawawi, 2008).

In regard to the close media-state partnership in Malaysia, Wong (2004) addressed the issue that such relationship would influence journalists to engage in self-censorship

in order not to offend the government. It cultivates a culture of fear – starting with journalists and other writers, which then spreads to publishers or broadcasters, distributors and even the public at large when confronted with anything that smacks of the slightest critical commentary on the government. Moreover, the greater concern is that the vast majority of journalists, editors, commentators and politicians in Malaysia accept the existing conditions, even as they suffer with the restrictions (Randhawa, Puah and Loone, 2005). Significantly, Mustafa (2003) highlighted that the public sphere in Malaysian society has been constrained so that ordinary citizens and concerned civil society groups have not been able to fully express their views and directly participate in the country's democratic process. He also contended that the mainstream press is instrumental in helping to promote the state's hegemonic influence over the society.

In 1997, Malaysia announced a no-censorship guarantee for the Internet, which is known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) Malaysia Bill of Guarantees. The then Prime Minister Mahathir was trying to attract investors to the proposed MSC, which would serve as the nation's bridge to move from the Industrial to the Information Age. The MSC is about 15 km wide by 50 km long, which stretches from the PETRONAS Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (the region's largest airport). Estimated to take 20 years to reach its full potential at an approximate cost of US\$20 billion, the MSC would help to diversify the Malaysian economy at a time when the nation faced increased competition from lower wage countries in the region, such as China and Vietnam (Abbott, 2004; George, 2005). In addition, Abbott (2004) pointed out that Mahathir was determined to give Malaysia a competitive advantage over its neighbor Singapore where stringent controls had been imposed on Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

The advent of Internet and online journalism was much welcomed and celebrated in Malaysia by those who craved for alternative perspectives (Wilson, Azizah and Khattab, 2003). Furthermore, it is clear that the Internet has had a discernible impact on Malaysian politics (Brown, 2005; George, 2003; McDaniel, 2002). Commenting on the loss of BN in the online war during the 12th General Election, the former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi admitted:

We didn't think it was important. It was a serious misjudgment... We thought that the newspapers, the print media, the television were important but young people were looking at text messages and blogs. It is painful to admit the influence of the alternative media. (Tan and Zawawi, 2008, p. 86)

Malaysiakini is the country's first commercial online newspaper launched by Steven Gan, just nine days before the 1999 general election, with funding from international press freedom groups including the South East Asian Press Alliance (SEPA). *Malaysiakini* is regarded as the most interesting and successful online newspaper among the various independent news sites in the country (George, 2005; Rodan, 2005; Tan and Zawawi, 2008). Furthermore, it is often recognised as setting the agenda for

other news media (Chandran, 2006; Steele, 2009). It has also won warm praise from around the world and a number of international awards for journalism (Chandran, 2006; Steele, 2009).

4. HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF THE VERNACULAR NEWSPAPERS IN MALAYSIA

As mentioned earlier, the vernacular newspapers in Malaysia tend to champion the interests of their respective communities. This phenomenon has its roots in the colonial era. Early Chinese newspapers in Malaya were partisan and sympathetic to the Chinese Revolution in China or focused their attention on business in Malaya. The relationship between the Chinese newspaper and their readers is based on trust. Today, the newspapers build trust by promoting traditional virtues and values strongly held by most Chinese people in Malaysia. At the same time, the Chinese community puts a very strong emphasis on education as a priority and they believe that “the poor should not be denied an education”. The Malaysian Chinese community strived hard to establish its present Chinese school system, one of the most comprehensive Chinese education systems outside the Greater Chinese region and among the Chinese community in Southeast Asia. Fundraising events for Chinese schools are common. Every year, millions are donated to support Chinese education in the nation. Understanding such concerns, Chinese newspapers establish their own programs to assist the poor to continue their studies and they hold annual fundraising programs to channel donations to Chinese primary and independent schools throughout the country.

As for the Malays, the seeds of ethnocentrism were sown when Malay newspapers were published in the 1870s through to the 1900s. The Malay newspapers were used to foster the spirit of nationalism and also utilized as channels to speak out against attitudes that hindered the progress of the Malays. In fact, the development of the Malay political parties was made possible by the Malay press (Syed Arabi, 1989), the most notable among them being *Utusan Melayu*. In addition, the Tamil press also carried the plight of the Indians in the oil palm estates and other economic sectors, while championing Indian education, helping to spread literary works and functioning as the vehicle for political demands (Syed Arabi, 1989).

According to Halimahton, Ngu and Raman (2006), the development of the newspaper industry in Malaya could be summarized into two phases. The first phase (1806 till late 1930s) saw the British traders and colonial officials pioneering the printing of English newspapers to satisfy the commercial needs of the British and the Europeans. A large part of the contents of these newspapers was commercial news and advertisements. The content of the Chinese and Indian newspapers then reflected the cultural, emotional and political attachment of the ethnic groups to their homelands. The Malay newspapers also mirrored the concerns of the community then – religion and later, Malay nationalism. The second phase (1940s and towards Independence in 1957) witnessed a shift in the Chinese and Indian newspapers. When both ethnic groups realized that they were going to make Malaya their home, the newspapers, especially

the Indian newspapers, campaigned to the readers to remain and become citizens of Malaya. This period saw newspapers further developing a stronger identification with their own ethnic communities.

The Malays, overwhelmed by the influx of the Indian and Chinese immigrants and realizing that they could lose their control on the political and economic affairs of the country, began demonstrating these fears through anti-Chinese and anti-Indian sentiments in their newspapers (Mohd Yusof, 2003). The non-Malays became more critical, especially against the pro-Malay attitude of the British administration. The fight for factional interests was prominent in the newspapers at that time (Dahari, 1992).

Halimahton, Ngu and Raman (2006) claimed that the racial orientation of the newspapers today – where they cater mainly to readers of the same racial group – has not changed much from the colonial days. Despite the Malay language being the national language of Malaysia for almost 50 years, the content of most, if not all, Malay-language newspapers basically caters to the interests and needs of the Malay, not Malaysian, community. This is in part due to the politics of ethnicity, i.e. divide and rule, that is being employed by most ethnic-based political parties in the country.

The exceptions are the English newspapers whose readership transcends racial groupings. The English newspapers are usually read by the elites and English-educated readers who are mostly concentrated in the urban areas. In addition, Lent (1990) also recognized that only the English newspapers are read by all racial groups and therefore, the only one that serves as an interethnic medium.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The gatekeeping theory is one of the oldest in the field of mass communication research (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2011; Soroka, 2012). Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim and Wrigley (2001) defined gatekeeping as “the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media” (p. 233). It is often defined as a series of decision points at which news items are either continued or halted as they pass along news channels from source to reporter to a series of editors. However, the gatekeeping process is also thought of to be more than just selection and includes how messages are shaped, timed for dissemination and handled. In fact, gatekeeping in mass communication can be seen as the overall process through which the social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed (Shoemaker *et al.*, 2001). Remarkably, gatekeeping is also connected to media sociology, the study of factors that influence how media messages turn out the way they do (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009).

Psychologist Kurt Lewin first proposed the gatekeeping process in his post-World War II research on social change. Although his research did not originally apply to the study of communication, Lewin did suggest that his theory of how “items” are selected or rejected as they pass through “channels” could be applied to the flow of news. This idea was quickly picked up by communication scholar, David Manning

White, whose case study of a newspaper wire service editor's selection of the day's news set into motion a line of research on news selection. White (as cited in Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) suggested a model that underscores the gatekeeper as the focal point that controls the information flow. He argued that news items were rejected because of three reasons: personal feelings, insufficient space and whether the story had already appeared. Subsequently, communication scholars contended that White's assumption of the media gatekeeping was too simplistic.

While the formative years of the development of gatekeeping theory happened mainly in the communication and journalism fields, the theory has since become embedded in various fields of scholarship, including political science, sociology, information science, management, law, health science and technology development (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Shoemaker (as cited in Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) has since classified the development of Lewin's gatekeeping theory into five main categories:

1. The *individual level* looks at the extent to which individuals are responsible for the gatekeeping selection, and consists of individuals' interpretations, decision-making, personality, background, values, role conceptions and experiences.
2. The *routine level* refers to those patterned, routinized, repeated practices for forms that media workers use to do their jobs.
3. The *organizational level* includes internal factors that vary by organization and at times by a group's decision-making patterns.
4. The *institutional level* concentrates mainly on the exogenous characteristics of organizations and their representatives that affect the gatekeeping process (e.g. market forces, political alliances).
5. The *social system level* explores the impact of ideology and culture on gatekeeping.

The gatekeeping theory has contributed to theories of social control, agenda-setting, framing as well as semantics and the use of language (Lasorsa, 2002). Soroka (2012) noted that much of the early gatekeeping literature focused on the selection of one event or another, rather than the selective framing of a single event. He also elucidated that some gatekeeping views and framing are in fact in tandem.

Notably, the Internet has been much investigated in the latest gatekeeping research following the prevalence of new communication technology (Cassidy, 2006; Dimitrova, Connolly-Ahern, Williams, Kaid and Reid, 2003; Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009; Singer, 2001; Zittrain, 2006). Hargittai (2003) noted that the central concern "is no longer what is produced, but what consumers hear and know about" and that "gatekeeping activity still occurs online, but now takes place at the level of information exposure (p. 17)".

6. METHOD

6.1 *Research Design and Recruitment*

Between January and February 2011, four face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with newspaper editors in Klang Valley. The interviewees were contacted by phone and were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study. All of

the interviewees were male, their age ranged from 45 to 58 years old, and all of them possessed professional experience as an editor for more than 10 years.

As shown in Table 1, the four interviewees were from *Utusan Malaysia*, a daily in Bahasa Malaysia or the national language; *The Star*, an English-language daily; *Sin Chew Daily*, a Chinese-language daily; and *Malaysiakini*, an alternative online newspaper. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia, the 2010 average daily circulation of *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* were 164,764, 247,661 and 384,391, respectively (www.abcm.org.my). *Utusan Malaysia* is one of the top Malay newspapers in the country. More importantly, it has always been singled out for evoking racial tension between the Malays and non-Malays (Kua, 2002; Lim and Har, 2008). *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* enjoy the highest circulation within their respective language stream. These three mainstream dailies have a national circulation, although predominantly the circulation is within Peninsular Malaysia (Selva, 2010). *Malaysiakini* has also gone on to record average daily hits of approximately 200,000, which compares respectably with the circulation of mainstream newspapers such as *The Star* and *New Straits Times* (Brown, 2002).

Table 1. List of editors interviewed

No.	Secret Code	Newspaper	Date of Interview
1.	INT1	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	January 23, 2011
2.	INT2	<i>The Star</i>	February 24, 2011
3.	INT3	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i>	February 25, 2011
4.	INT4	<i>Malaysiakini</i>	January 13, 2011

6.2 Data Collection

The average duration of the interviews was approximately 1.5 hours. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer introduced herself, mentioning that she was a Ph.D. candidate in one of the public universities in the Klang Valley. The interviewer then explained the study objectives and assured the participants that all interviews would be confidential, with no identifying information incorporated into transcripts or subsequent analysis.

During the interview, participants were prompted to talk about their considerations in monitoring the coverage of interethnic conflicts. They were also asked to talk about the newspaper policies for coverage of interethnic conflicts. In addition, interviewees were asked about how ownership has affected the gatekeeping of the newspaper, particularly in the coverage of interethnic conflicts. The participants were also asked how external factors like politics, economy and technology have influenced the gatekeeping of the newspapers.

Prior to the interviews, the researchers conducted content analysis to examine the coverage of interethnic conflicts by *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star*, *Sin Chew Daily* and *Malaysiakini* (Yang and Md Sidin, 2011, 2012, 2014). The study focused on three specific interethnic conflicts: (1) *keris* polemics; (2) Hindu Rights Action Force

(Hindraf); (3) “Allah” dispute and arson attacks. These cases are highly appropriate to the study because scholars pointed out that they are the salient interethnic conflicts that happened recently and have had a great impact on interethnic relations as well as the politics in the country (Kua, 2010; Lee, 2010; Lim, Gomes and Azly, 2009; Loo and Mustafa, 2010). Appendix A provides the background of these selected cases. In order to gain better insight into the findings of the content analysis, some of the interview questions were formulated based on the results of the study.

6.3 Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer read all the transcripts while listening to the recordings to ensure that participants’ verbal utterances had been captured as precisely as possible. The process of constant comparison, involving the comparison of one piece of data (one interview or one statement) with all others, was employed to ensure that the analysis represented all perspectives.

7. FINDINGS

7.1 *Utusan Malaysia*

The content analysis found that *Utusan* framed the interethnic conflicts to support the status quo. It also portrayed UMNO leaders as defenders of Malay rights. INT1 stated that while *Utusan* champions the interests of Malays, it is not an irresponsible newspaper. INT1 also mentioned that *Utusan* has to find a balance between the interests of the Malays and that of the nation as a whole. Furthermore, INT1 disclosed that *Utusan* had received warning letters from the Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN) for its coverage on several interethnic cases, e.g., the *keris* polemics, Lina Joy controversy, Hindraf, Allah disputes, arson attacks and Azan case. *Utusan* was warned not to report these cases harshly as they were considered highly sensitive.

Utusan is a mainstream paper, it’s a national paper read by all different races... We have to promote unity and national integration, otherwise I can’t imagine what will happen to the society if the Malay newspapers keep on attacking certain race. As an editor, we have our responsibility, we have a watchdog who watch over us. The KDN, the Government and so on. We have received letters of warning from them... (personal communication, January 23, 2011)

7.1.1 *Politicization of Interethnic Issues*

In addition, INT1 claimed that everything in Malaysia has been politicized since the general elections in 2008. Therefore, only the senior reporters who understand the politics would be assigned to report interethnic cases. INT1 also stated that he received a lot of letters from different races, including the Malays, Chinese and Indians; however, he only published those that were less sensitive in content.

We have to choose the less sensitive letters or those that are in the context of *Utusan*, you know the context of *Utusan*...how we want to maneuver it... After the elections in 2008, **everything has been politicized**...So I always have to think a lot [about what to publish] **otherwise people will twist it**. (personal communication, January 23, 2011)

Discussing on the interconnectedness between mass media and politics, INT1 highlighted an interview between Utusan and the then president of MCA, Chua Soi Lek.

Today we interviewed Soi Lek. It is a very big interview in *Utusan* in terms of politics and strategies. Soi Lek wants to get support for his party from the Chinese community, he has to be more ultra at this moment...after all you can see now the depleting supports for MCA...I don't think *Utusan* will attack Soi Lek [for being ultra] except if sometime **we also get pressure from the Malays behind**...and we have to send our voice across so that MCA will get the message...**this is politics**. (personal communication, January 23, 2011)

7.1.2 Editors as Gatekeepers

INT1 also stressed that the ethnicity of reporters is very important when it comes to interethnic conflicts reporting. Therefore, the chief reporter and editors of the news desk will help to identify the right reporter for the assignment. INT1 also saw the editors as having a powerful effect.

...whether the editors want to make an issue disappears or makes it big...it depends on the editorial of a newspaper... Editor is the "captain" because **the attitude, mentality and approach of an editor will guide the direction of the newspaper**. (personal communication, January 23, 2011)

The content analysis found that the vast majority of news reports in *Utusan* displayed a noticeable absence of any response by non-UMNO spokespersons or representatives. Commenting on the lack of news source diversity, INT1 stated that reporters usually have a pool of news sources, whom they contact for comments and quotes. The reporters are always reminded to contact all the parties involved, including the public, NGOs, academics, etc. However, INT1 acknowledged that some of the reporters are "lazy" in the sense that they prefer to contact the same person that they are familiar with.

Furthermore, INT1 said there is no instruction or unwritten rules at *Utusan* for not using the opposition leaders as the paper's news sources. However, he admitted that opposition leaders were not quoted sometimes because their comments were not in line with the government's policies.

7.1.3 Conflict as a News Value

In his discussion on the finding that conflict appeared to be the most salient frame found across the four newspapers in their coverage of interethnic conflicts, INT1

remarked that “bad news is good news” as conflicts always carry news value. The conflict frame in the coverage reflected disagreement between individuals, groups, parties or institutions. It dichotomized the good and bad, while referring to two sides instead of more than two sides of the issues. Interestingly, INT1 singled out *Malaysiakini* as the most controversial news portal, while claiming that some Chinese newspapers were sensational in their reportage of interethnic conflicts.

The basic newsworthiness, one of it is conflict. **People like to read controversial news.** *Malaysiakini* is the most controversial news portal...They want to sell the newspaper. They just report bad news about something and that’s why their circulation is so high. (personal communication, January 23, 2011)

7.1.5 Reporting Social Movement

The content analysis also found that *Utusan* did not report the number of Hindraf protesters. INT1 explained that it is the policy of the newspaper to not report the number of protestors.

Our policy is that **we don’t want to mention the number of protestors.** What is so significant about the number? What are the reasons for *Malaysiakini* to mention 100,000? This is a *demonstrasi haram* (illegal demonstration). If you get the figures out, you will somehow encourage people to participate in the protest, which I think **we will get another letter from KDN.** (personal communication, January 23, 2011)

7.1.6 History and Background of the Newspaper

INT1 also emphasized that one needs to look at the history of the newspaper to understand its establishment and orientation. For example, *Utusan Melayu* was established around 1937-38 in Singapore to fight for independence from British rule as well as the rights of the Malays. He understood that the Chinese newspapers in Malaysia, for example, *Sin Chew*, were also influenced by their history and ethnic background.

We have a column in *Utusan* that publishes column articles that are translated from Chinese newspapers...My Chinese friends once told me, “You will find it scary if you read *Sin Chew* for certain [interethnic] issues”. Actually in *Utusan*, the approach for reporting interethnic issues is the same as *Sin Chew*. **It goes back to the history and background of the newspaper.** For example, *Utusan* was established in 1937 or 1938 in Singapore when the Malays wanted to fight for independence, and for the rights of the Malays at that time. So that is the trend of *Utusan* until today. (personal communication, January 23, 2011)

As half of *Utusan’s* shares are owned by UMNO, INT1 admitted that the ownership influences the newspaper’s approach. Interestingly, he also found that the Chinese newspapers in Malaysia enjoy relatively more freedom due to their independent ownership.

Who owns *Utusan*? It matters, **it will influence the newspaper's approach**. There is no 100% of press freedom because there is always an ownership limitation behind...The Chinese newspapers for example, *Sin Chew*, *Nanyang* and etc. are owned by a tycoon. The Sibü tycoon right? I know him...So the Chinese newspapers have more freedom relatively because their owner is a tycoon, a businessman [instead of political party]. (personal communication, January 23, 2011)

Significantly, INT1 said he always finds himself stuck “in the middle” under many circumstances. He mentioned that he is tired after spending 20 over years in the industry, and he wishes to have a change and go into lecturing.

You have to understand politics in order to judge a newspaper. We [the reporters and editors] are stuck in the middle actually. I am feeling very tired after 20 over years. I think I want to go and teach...I think I want a change. (personal communication, January 23, 2011)

7.2 *The Star*

INT2 asserted that one of the ground rules for the newspaper's column writers is that racism is not tolerated. If a writer decides to write about an ethnic problem, he or she will need to discuss the issue from all different levels and perspectives. Similarly, the reporters at *The Star* are very careful in choosing their words to report interethnic conflicts, while toning town radical political rhetoric. Therefore, INT2 mentioned that *The Star* does not receive much pressure from KDN for its coverage on interethnic conflicts because the newspaper has tempered the issues quite well.

7.2.1 *The Moderation Approach*

The Star's editorial can always make a more reasonable approach...to take on things more matured, cool down the situation...But whether people pay attention to us or not, that's another thing...Most of the newspapers are very careful in what they say because it reflects the newspaper's view so they couch their words carefully. (personal communication, February 24, 2011)

INT2 revealed that the role of *The Star* in toning down the interethnic conflicts is, however, not always appreciated. He explained that this is because people prefer the “heroic” style instead of moderation approach.

I think the country is very politically divisive, if you play the [moderation] role, critics will say why don't you call a spade a spade? For me, it doesn't make sense to offend people. You can see things in a very different way...you don't have to use the thunder and lightning approach. Now, in this internet age, people like to hit and attack...But I think in the long run, for the sake of Malaysia, **I think we should still pursue this line of moderation**. Moderation has not always been popular because you will be seen as a coward. (personal communication, February 24, 2011)

Nonetheless, INT2 highlighted that the level of openness to discuss about interethnic conflicts is slowly improving in the country. Previously, the government would wish that the newspapers do not report about the conflicts at all. However, times have changed and people realized that it was better to deal with them rather than covering up. INT2 recognized that even the mainstream newspapers have taken a change in attitude and stand in that they have started to tackle interethnic conflicts tactfully. The existence of many different sources of information, especially the new media like the Internet and even mobile phones, is one of the factors that contributed to the improvement of this openness.

Commenting on the dominance of UMNO leaders as the news sources for the coverage of interethnic conflicts, INT2 explained that it was because the UMNO leaders were easier to approach.

Maybe UMNO leaders are easier to be approached. I think by nature the Malays are quite open, easier to talk to. I've done my share of crime reporting. In an accident, if you go to a Malay house, the family of the victim will actually talk to you. If you go to a Chinese house, the possibility of being chased out of the house is quite great. (personal communication, February 24, 2011)

7.2.2 Pressure from Politicians

As the MCA holds the controlling share of *The Star*, INT2 admitted that its leaders were naturally given greater space by the newspaper. However, he addressed that sometimes the reporters of *The Star* feel the language barrier when interviewing the MCA leaders because the latter speak in Mandarin while some of the reporters are illiterate in the language. INT2 mentioned that while he had never received any formal instruction to not cover the opposition leaders, there is always pressure to discourage him to do so. Nevertheless, INT2 remarked that the opposition deserves more space after the 2008 general election because they run the governments of a few states.

There's always the pressure to discourage you. Sometimes it doesn't come from even the top leaders. There are a lot of busybodies...who think they can speak for the party or the Government...So this is for me to take the pressure. They will call me and complain why are you giving so much coverage to the DAP? For me, I don't want to argue over the phone, why should I waste my time answering you? (personal communication, February 24, 2011)

INT2 also mentioned that *The Star* reported about the late Karpal Singh's [the then chairman of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), an opposition party] 70th birthday in 2011. Subsequently, he received a lot of angry calls from Barisan leaders.

Karpal Singh celebrated his 70th birthday. I ran a full page coverage, two pages actually. Oh, I got a lot of angry response from Barisan leaders. It was a horrible day for me...Tomorrow we are running Kit Siang's (advisor of DAP) 70th birthday, I don't know whether we'll get calls or not...They will

just grumble because they are feeling insecure. Just like when I write about the Government, DAP fellows will call and complain to me. (personal communication, February 24, 2011)

Interestingly, INT2 also commended that the MCA leaders are very logical in the sense that they only demand for more prominence in the newspaper and leave INT2 alone to do his job. INT2 added that The Star Group is a public-listed company that makes an average of RM200 million a year, thus both the MCA and the company are very conscious about the circulation and profit.

According to INT2, the ethnicity of a reporter is not the criterion that he takes into consideration when it comes to assigning tasks because he trusts his reporters. However, he singled out an unusual event, where specifically Malay reporters were sent to cover an incident that happened in Kampung Baru during the *Operasi Lalang* in 1987. He explained that it was done to ensure the personal safety of the non-Malay reporters. At that time, some of the Malays and UMNO leaders had gathered in the Kampung Baru area and the air was thick with tension. INT2 remembered his Malay colleagues calling him and saying that there was a lot of anger and they were quite worried for their counterparts from the Chinese newspapers.

7.2.3 Reporting Social Movement

The content analysis found that *The Star* also did not report the number of Hindraf protesters. INT2 explained that it was because he has set the ground rule to not report the number of protestors.

My ground rule now is that we don't report the number of protesters. If a demonstration involves the opposition, the police will tell you a smaller number but the opposition will give you a bigger number. So we have decided, we're not going to report the number because it is always conflicting, depending on whom you talk to. (personal communication, February 24, 2011)

Discussing about the role of *The Star* in promoting integration and unity, INT2 highlighted that *The Star* is the only newspaper that makes it a point to promote festivals of all the ethnic groups and even of subgroups. The Star Group publishes a Malay newspaper called *M-Star* on Sundays and it introduces the moon cake, *yee sang*, *tong yuen*, *Gao Wong Yeh* and *Ponggal* festivals, among others, to its Malay readers.

7.2.4 Commenting on Utusan

Although INT2 knows the editors of *Utusan* very well, he finds it very difficult to understand whether the articles written by them reflect their beliefs or UMNO policies. He also observed that the Malay-language newspaper operates differently from other mainstream newspapers because its reporters were very involved in politics, especially during the 1950s. In contrast, the reporters of *The Star* are all watchers and recorders of events and histories instead of participants. Therefore, INT2 maintained that the reporters of the two newspapers possess very different world views and sentiments.

I think *Utusan* is a different category altogether. I know these guys very well but I also find it difficult to understand whether it's their belief or party policy... **If you try to understand Utusan's history, you will see that their reporters are very involved with politics.** We're [*The Star*] all watchers, we're all recorders of events and histories, we are not participant...A lot of them [*Utusan*] actually ended up as politicians in the early history of 1950s...I'm not a card-carry member of the MCA...almost all my editors and reporters are not involved in MCA. So, our world views are different. I operate because my employer is MCA, I have certain directive I will carry. But because I'm not a party member, my sentiments will be quite different. (personal communication, February 24, 2011)

7.3 *Sin Chew Daily*

It is interesting to note that INT3 stressed that *Sin Chew* is not an irresponsible newspaper although its mission is to defend the interests of the Chinese community in the areas of language, education and culture.

7.3.1 *Guardian of the Chinese Community*

When something happens, we will think: if we report in this manner, what would be the Chinese community's reaction? **We are very careful.** Sometimes we don't use pictures for our news. What would the Government think? Would they think that we are playing up the issue? We even consider the size of the news report. On the front page or inside? What would be the Malay community's reaction? Would it affect the interethnic harmony if they refute? **If we imitate the Utusan's way of reporting, I wonder how many times the Chinese newspapers would have been shut down.** (personal communication, February 25, 2011)

The content analysis found that *The Star* and *Sin Chew* managed to reflect the multifaceted nature of the interethnic conflicts to a certain extent, however, little was done to follow up on the deeper issues. INT3 argued that it is challenging for the Chinese newspapers to defend the interests of the Chinese community on one hand and to heed the government policies on another. He stressed that the government always pinpoints *Sin Chew* instead of other Chinese newspapers because it enjoys the highest circulation and is considered the most outspoken Chinese newspaper.

Noting on the finding that UMNO leaders appeared to be the most prominent news sources for *Sin Chew* in its coverage of interethnic conflicts, INT3 explained that the party plays a dominant role in the Government and hence, it justifies the heavy reliance on UMNO leaders as news sources. When asked about the reason for the lack of opinions by Chinese political leaders in the coverage of the *keris* polemics (an issue of great concern to the Chinese community), INT3 explained that *Sin Chew* always tries to contain controversial issues in its reports. He said that especially for sensitive issues like the *keris* polemics, *Sin Chew* certainly does not want to see the issue go out of control.

7.3.2 Considerations in the Gatekeeping Process

In 2007, *Sin Chew* published an article on its front page with three photographs that showed Hishammuddin accepting, unsheathing and kissing the *keris* at the UMNO General Assembly. Next to these potentially unfavorable photographs, however, was a favorable headline “Hishammuddin told UMNO Youth delegates that it is not a zero-sum game, (government) does not restrict the development of Chinese and Tamil primary schools” (*Sin Chew Daily*, 7 November 2007). INT3 explained that such a layout was done with the intention to make the whole presentation look more neutral. However, he also disclosed that Hishammuddin was still unhappy as he felt that the Chinese-language newspaper should not have highlighted the photographs.

When Hishammuddin wanted to wield the *keris* for the third time (in 2007), he contacted the media. The meeting was held at his house, I was there too... He hoped we can understand why he wanted to wield the *keris* again...it is not about defeating the non-Malays but to awake the UMNO and UMNO Youth. He also told us that he needs to depend on the Chinese vote and he wants to be a leader for all. So he hoped we won't misinterpret him again in our coverage...**When we reported that he guaranteed the Chinese schools are not the obstacles, the Chinese community would be more reassured.** Although it was just an empty talk, some people still liked it. So during that time, **we made it look more neutral despite [the headline and photo] looked a little contrary.** (personal communication, February 25, 2011)

In addressing the finding that conflict appeared to be the most salient frame found across the four newspapers, INT3 asserted that conflict is to be expected in a multicultural society like Malaysia. He added that there will be problems and conflicts as long as government policies are unfair to the people. Nevertheless, *Sin Chew* reports about many touching stories that happen in the society. The objective is to show its readers that there are still many positive things in the world, which are worth cherishing. In this respect, it is hoped that the newspaper could contribute to peacemaking, which is to remind the people that truth, goodness and beauty still exist in human beings.

In addition, INT3 pointed out that the columns in *Sin Chew* are usually written by the newspaper's journalists because it would be easier for the newspaper to control the content. Furthermore, the columnists often discuss and exchange opinions on how to write and what to include in their articles.

The columnists usually consist of the people from our newspaper, our colleagues. Because of that, we can exchange opinions on how to write and what to write in the columns. **It would be easier to control.** And they always keep up to the latest current affairs, this make their writings more objective. As for the readers, because they have different political inclinations (i.e. they could be PAS or UMNO supporters), their perspectives in seeing things might be a bit narrow. With regard to certain topics, they might, say, DAP

supporters, would criticize everything that is done by the MCA and vice versa. So we seldom use this kind of articles for column. (personal communication, February 25, 2011)

7.3.3 Commenting on *Utusan*

INT3 expressed much dissatisfaction towards *Utusan* during the interview. He condemned that *Utusan* does not care whether its reports would cause any problems and that its only concern is whether the coverage would benefit the Government or BN. Worse, it will even go to the extent of making up news. Despite this, *Utusan* does not seem to be a problem for the government because it is a pro-government newspaper. According to INT3, the readers of *Utusan* are mainly the Malays, specifically Malays that support BN. As the newspaper only reports on negative issues when it comes to the Chinese community, he is worried that it will create hatred amongst the readers towards the non-Malays in the long run.

In 2005, the then Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi criticized *Sin Chew* for playing up the NEP (New Economic Policy) and *keris* wielding issues. At the same time, *Utusan* also condemned the then MCA president Ong Ka Ting for questioning the Malay rights (*Utusan Malaysia*, 23 July 2005). Commenting on this, INT3 pointed out that Abdullah was not aware of the real situation as he had been given distorted information by others.

Abdullah was not clear of the situation when he said the Chinese newspapers played up the racial issues. This is because **people would normally feed him with information** and that's where he got the negative impression...As long as there are people, whether Chinese or Malay, who criticize the UMNO leaders, *Utusan* will defend. That's why it condemned Ong Ka Ting...they would tell the Chinese newspapers not to play the racial card, we felt it is ridiculous... The Chinese community is very concerned about all these things [NEP and *keris* wielding issues] and **the Chinese press has the responsibility to report**... They single out *Sin Chew* because we are the biggest Chinese newspaper, and are most influential in the Chinese community. We are a serious newspaper; we focus on politics, economy, culture and education. **We always have big goals.** (personal communication, February 25, 2011)

7.3.4 Reporting Social Movement

The content analysis found that *Sin Chew* was the only newspaper that published the full memorandum submitted by Hindraf to the British government. INT3 explained it was because the newspaper recognized the cause of Hindraf.

Hindraf was fighting for something the Indian community deserves. In Malaysia, **the Indian community is the weakest, most pitiful and deserves the most sympathy.** The Chinese community is not as bad because basically in terms of rights, we are very united and cohesive. And the Chinese community is very perseverant in [mother tongue] education. Although there is NEP and

many unfair policies, when it comes to business, the Chinese can still survive to a certain extent... But the Indians are very pitiful. The MIC can't protect their rights. The Indians have problems even to satisfy their daily needs. The points listed out in the memorandum truly reflected the Indian's situation. **Some of them even reflected the situation of the Chinese community**, and the non-Malay communities. So we think we should publish the full memorandum. (personal communication, February 25, 2011)

With regard to *The Star*, INT3 maintained that the newspaper often avoids the important issues and dwells on the trivial because its audience consists of many Malays besides the Chinese, Indians as well as the ministers. He also pointed out that *The Star* is not accountable to the Chinese community. Nonetheless, INT3 commented that the English section of *Malaysiakini* is objective and is able to provide a lot of evidence when it exposes the wrongdoings of the government.

7.4 *Malaysiakini*

Through the content analysis, *Malaysiakini* was found to reflect a counter-hegemonic discourse in its coverage of interethnic conflicts. The alternative newspaper devoted much space to voices that condemned the government, UMNO and BN. Its coverage also tends to identify if a particular story is related to the Constitution and freedom as well as its significance in the larger political picture and its implications in a multiracial society. Commenting on this, INT4 mentioned the following.

7.4.1 *Promoting Public Sphere*

While BN is a combination of racially-based political parties, they are not able to solve the interethnic problems. The only way to solve it is to get the 25, 26 or 27 millions of Malaysians to get together, **give them a platform, where they can actually come together and debate the issues**. Malaysia has been a very complex society, there will be problems, but I feel that there will not be a situation where what the Government said they fear, which is riots. I believe if you provide the people with a platform, and you make sure that the level of debate won't degenerate into name-calling and calling each other racist, you would be able to generate pretty productive discussions. (personal communication, January 13, 2011).

According to INT4, the editors and reporters of *Malaysiakini* always discuss among themselves about the role of the newspaper in promoting integration and unity in the country. He stressed that it is *Malaysiakini's* culture to think about integration and unity. In fact, it is for this purpose that *Malaysiakini* was established. When it comes to reporting interethnic cases, *Malaysiakini* does not consider the ethnicity of the reporters but would assign the job to anyone who happens to be free.

The content analysis found that the three mainstream newspapers presented straight news as their largest category in the coverage of interethnic conflicts. In stark contrast,

Malaysiakini devoted much of its coverage to opinion pieces, especially letters that greatly reflected a broad array of stances regarding the interethnic conflicts. INT4 revealed that when *Malaysiakini* was first set up, he and his colleagues were surprised by the extent of debate among the common civilians. They were also surprised to discover that there are many people who could write very well and have great opinions. Due to the fact that those opinions were not being reflected in the mainstream newspapers, *Malaysiakini* decided to put emphasis on letters from the readers.

Malaysians have strong opinions on a lot of issues. And you don't see them being expressed for a very long time. You look at the letters to editors to *Star*, *Straits Times* and etc., and you thought this is it, really. They talk about dogs being killed...some really inconsequential issues, rather than the burning issues of the day, about race, religion and all that stuff...When we first started our letters column, we were surprised because we found out that **there were a lot of people out there who could write very well, who have great opinions and all these are not being reflected in the newspaper.** So we decided to put emphasis on it. (personal communication, January 13, 2011).

INT4 revealed that *Malaysiakini* does not prescribe any guideline for the columnists. The alternative newspaper also does not restrict the topics or issues being discussed by the columnists.

We edit the flow, grammar, sentence structure, things like that. Not so much on content. I think for a media organization, there would be some measure of... I wouldn't say censorship, but I would say some measures of what I call "good journalism". Good journalism is basically ensuring that what you write is concise, well argued and well presented. (personal communication, January 13, 2011).

We also found that the sourcing practice employed by *Malaysiakini* was strikingly different from the three mainstream newspapers, where it used common civilians as the most important news source. INT4 added that the news sources used in *Malaysiakini* depend on the newspaper's access. For example, it has been trying for many years to get an interview with Hishammuddin but he has so far refused to do so. INT4 said many politicians will filter the interview questions when they are approached by the mainstream media. They might even look through the interview report before it is published. However, they are not able to demand the same from *Malaysiakini* and INT4 guessed that maybe the reason why many politicians are uncomfortable with giving the alternative newspaper an interview. They are worried that there would be a slip of the tongue during the interview and that would create controversy which they prefer not to have.

7.4.2 Pressure from the Government

INT4 mentioned that when *Malaysiakini* was newly found, its reporters were removed from the press conferences that were held by the government. Under such

circumstances, the reporters had to wait outside and obtained the updates from other reporters when the press conference was over. Sometimes they gave their tape recorder to other reporters to record the events so that they would not miss out.

The police have a running ban on *Malaysiakini*. We're not allowed in...UMNO Supreme Council, there is a ban on *Malaysiakini*. I think they are very clear about our slant. (personal communication, January 13, 2011)

Due to the above-mentioned restrictions, INT4 revealed that there were many stories that *Malaysiakini* could not report. Consequently, the editors had to decide what the alternative newspaper could do based on its political stand. They eventually decided to provide an alternative to the mainstream newspapers.

We cover things that are not being covered by the mainstream, readers can at least have an alternative opinion on the issues...When it comes to news reporting, **we support the underdogs.** And really it doesn't matter who are the underdogs. They are people who are being marginalized, people who are being ignored, even within UMNO, people who are being blacked out. When Mahathir was blacked out, we gave him a lot of coverage. Tengku Razali, we gave him a lot of coverage. So I guess it's to balance off what the mainstream papers are not doing. (personal communication, January 13, 2011)

7.4.3 Reporting Social Movement

The content analysis found that there was a discrepancy in terms of the number of Hindraf protesters reported by the four newspapers. It was significant to note that the three mainstream newspapers avoided mentioning the number of protesters in their initial report of the Hindraf gathering, and later referred to government sources in quoting the number. Nonetheless, the number of protesters reported by the three mainstream newspapers was less than what was reported in *Malaysiakini*. In addition, *Malaysiakini* conducted an interview with Uthayakumar (one of the Hindraf leaders) after the Hindraf demonstration. During the interview, Uthayakumar claimed that there were actually 100,000 supporters during the rally, not 30,000 as reported by *Malaysiakini*. Commenting on the discrepancy, INT4 explicated that although there is no accurate way of measuring the crowd, *Malaysiakini* has a relatively more systematic way to estimate the number of protesters, a way which is called the grid system.

I think we definitely dispute what Uthayakumar said. I don't think there were 100,000 people out on the street on that particular day. Some people quoted 50,000. We decided on 30,000 because it is based on the people on the ground in different places, not just in one place. There were different groups being separated in different parts of the city. The big one is around KLCC area and then there's another one somewhere in Tun Razak, Ampang area... We even got a map, in terms of where the different groups are, and all that. So it's based on an estimation of that, we got someone on motorbike to go around,

so at least we are able to give a proper sort of estimates of the number of people. (personal communication, January 13, 2011)

7.4.4 Commenting on *Utusan*

Speaking about *Utusan*, INT4 claimed that it was quite obvious that the newspaper has been provoking racial tension between the Malays and non-Malays because some of the news published by it were distorted and inflammatory.

I guess they [*Utusan*] feel that somehow they get protection and immunity partly because they are owned by UMNO... You would have to ask the *Utusan* people, how they feel about it... Really, **if a newspaper other than *Utusan* happen to carry that kind of reports, they would have been shut down by the Government.** (personal communication, January 13, 2011)

8. DISCUSSION

By devoting most of their articles to straight news in the coverage of interethnic conflicts, the three mainstream newspapers performed surveillance instead of a correlation function. This showed that their readers were more of observers and less of active players. Van Dijk (as cited in Rinnawi, 2007) remarked that when straight news dominated the coverage, it left little room for the creativeness of journalists, resulting in a top-down communication format.

In contrast to the mainstream newspapers, *Malaysiakini* had most of its coverage in the form of letters, which acted as a platform for the grassroots to comment, discuss and debate on the interethnic conflicts. Letters are known as an “enduring forum for public debate” by Wahl-Jorgensen (2002), while Jha (2008) recognized that letters allow citizens to communicate with one another, and even to act together. In his discussion of the alternative media, Atkinson (2005) mentioned that interactivity has been described as a reaction on the part of a receiver to earlier transmissions from a sender, and it has been understood as audience engagement with stimulating qualities of texts. He added that true interactivity can only occur when audience are able to co-create media content alongside producers. The letters published in *Malaysiakini* thus reflected a higher level of interactivity between the readers and the alternative newspaper than those in the mainstream newspapers. Moreover, Chandran (2006) mentioned that for online newspapers like *Malaysiakini*, content from readers can lower the reliance on content generated by salaried staff. Significantly, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) discussed that compared to the traditional media, the Internet provides much more opportunity for audience members to interact with newsmakers, news creators, and each other. This high level of interactivity turns audience members into gatekeepers. In addition, the ability of users to tailor the content of online news to their own interest also contributes to the sophistication of gatekeeping in the Internet.

It is important to study how reporters gather news and the types of sources they use because sources determine not only the type of information that is presented to the public, but the image of society that is presented (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002). This study found that there was a remarkable consistency across the three mainstream newspapers

in utilising UMNO leaders as the major news source. Heavy reliance on the UMNO leaders revealed that the mainstream newspapers tended to create a specific picture of power and hegemony by legitimating UMNO's opinion, stance and status. Chai (2006) also maintained that the prominent coverage of UMNO by newspapers helped to normalize and sustain UMNO's domination within the BN coalition, specifically and within the Malaysian society, generally. In fact, the significance and importance of UMNO to Malaysian politics in general and its dominance in the government is well recognized by scholars (Ooi, 2006; Ramasamy, 2009).

While the mainstream media has a tendency to give privilege to the powerful, alternative media on the other hand, set out to provide advantage to the powerless and the marginal, to offer a perspective from the ground and to say the unspoken (Atkinson, 2005). The finding that civilians were predominant in *Malaysiakini's* coverage of the interethnic conflicts lends support to the above notion. In the specifics of Malaysian political culture, where the government has *de facto* control of the press and laws preventing journalists from reporting on sensitive issues such as ethnicity and religion, *Malaysiakini* has always been singled out for its independence and fortitude (Brown, 2005; George, 2005; Kenyon, 2010; Rodan, 2005; Tan and Zawawi, 2008). Steele (2009) also asserted that there was no question that *Malaysiakini* journalists saw themselves as agents of change.

Furthermore, studies on alternative media also showed that they often provide a space for the rational-critical discourse, which is crucial to the creation of a public sphere (Atton, 2003; Harcup, 2003). Former Singaporean journalist and media scholar, Cherian George has called the kind of journalism practiced at *Malaysiakini* "contentious". A subset of alternative media, Internet news outlets in Singapore and Malaysia are:

contentious in that they directly and explicitly challenge the authority of elites in setting the national agenda and in forging consensus... These websites are engaged in more than just a struggle against government domination. They also embody competing normative notions of journalism and its role in democracy and subscribe to a more morally-engaged and less disinterested mode of journalism than their mainstream counterparts. (George, as cited in Steele, 2009 :98)

In addition, scholars stated that convenient statistics for reporting protests include figures such as the number of protesters, the number of arrests, the amount of property damage and the extent of resulting traffic delays (Arpan, Baker, Lee, Jung, Lorusso and Smith, 2006). This study found that there was a discrepancy in terms of the number of Hindraf protesters reported by the newspapers. It was also significant to note that the three mainstream newspapers avoided mentioning the number of protesters in their initial report of the Hindraf gathering. These findings were in line with Higgins' (2006) notion that mainstream media coverage of demonstrations is marked by disparagement of numbers (undercounting), disparagement of the movement's effectiveness, trivialization (making light of the movement, including language and goals), polarization (emphasizing counter demonstrations) and marginalization (showing demonstrators to be deviant or unrepresentative).

It is noteworthy that the editors of *The Star*, *Sin Chew* and *Malaysiakini* have low regard for *Utusan's* approach in reporting interethnic conflicts. The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) conducted a research on *Utusan's* editorials between March to April 2008. It was reported that the intensity, frequency and bias of *Utusan's* coverage on ethnic issues were noted by the CIJ with concern. It was found that the message of Malays were being threatened as well as that the “enemy” is the opposition and represented mainly by the non-Malays, was pervasively conveyed in the news pages, editorials and readers’ letters.

The strong chauvinist agenda in *Utusan Malaysia* is obviously exempted from the control of the authorities. If the justification to have all the laws and rules to control the media is to prevent the fanning of racial hatred, then *Utusan Malaysia* should have been hauled in a long time ago and prosecuted for infringing laws like the Printing Presses and Publications Act and the Sedition Act. Instead, the extreme Malay-centric line it takes, which borders on racism, is encouraged while moderate dissenting views that could potentially open up room for rational debate and the fostering of understanding among the various ethnic communities are curbed. The fact that the Malay community does see the political problems in the country through many different lenses is lost in the newspaper’s practice which prevents “other” perspectives from surfacing. (Yip, 2008 :60)

It is also of significant concern that all the four newspapers reported that religious issues have been politicized in Malaysia. The fact that the newspapers relied heavily on politicians as their news sources also lent support to this assertion. Furthermore, the finding also resonated with the opinion expressed by various scholars that interethnic and religious issues remain highly politicized in Malaysia while the country’s beautiful diversity had become an easy prey for many politicians to inflame divisive sentiments for personal interest (Abbott and Franks, 2007; Syed Husin, 2008).

9. CONCLUSION

This study examined the gatekeeping process undertaken by Malaysian newspapers in reporting interethnic conflicts. The findings reveal that gatekeeping took place at the individual, routine, organizational as well as institutional levels. Significantly, the two newspapers owned by pro-government political parties – *Utusan* by UMNO and *The Star* by MCA – claimed that ownership had an impact on their gatekeeping decision. The study also reveals that political reason was the primary external factor influencing the gatekeeping of the newspapers in their coverage of interethnic conflicts. Furthermore, this study indicates that journalists/editors shape a reality that reflects the political, economic and ideological boundaries within which they work. More importantly, this study finds that gatekeeping reflects a struggle between dominant social norms and efforts for change.

With regard to future research direction, in order to investigate the impact of gatekeeping on people’s perception of an issue, it would be interesting to juxtapose the findings of this study with public opinion data to measure public perceptions towards the interethnic conflicts.

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APPENDIX A

Background of the Interethnic Conflicts

The Keris Wielding Polemics

In 2005, the then UMNO Youth Chief and Malaysia Education Minister, Hishammuddin Hussein wielded the *keris* at the UMNO Youth general assembly, which he claimed to be a means to motivate the Malays. Following that, the UMNO Youth general assembly in 2006 was noted for some racist statements made by several delegates in addition to the *keris*-wielding action repeated by Hishammuddin. Despite strong criticism from the leaders of MCA, Gerakan and opposition parties, Hishammuddin wielded the *keris* again at the UMNO Youth general assembly in 2007.

After the March 8, 2008 political tsunami, the MCA and Gerakan leaders blamed UMNO for their electoral debacle, in particular the insensitivity shown by UMNO leaders like Hishammuddin for his provocative *keris*-wielding actions at the UMNO Youth general assemblies. The non-Malays perceived the action of Hishammuddin wielding the *keris* for three consecutive years as a gesture meant to defend *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and to threaten those who opposed Malay special rights. The non-Malays also felt that wielding a *keris* at a highly-charged political meeting was confrontational and combative, and tramples on the rights and sensitivities of the non-Malays (*Sin Chew Daily*, 27 April 2008).

Hishammuddin admitted that his wielding of the *keris* was among the causes of the Barisan Nasional's poor performance in the general election. He later apologised to the non-Malays for inciting their fear to a symbol, a consequence that was not his intention, and to the Malays for not being able to uphold their symbol of heritage (*The Star*, 27 April 2008a).

The Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf)

The Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) is a coalition of 30 Hindu non-governmental organisations committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights in Malaysia. On November 25, 2007, the supporters of Hindraf gathered outside the British High Commission to hand over a 100,000-signature memorandum to the British Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. The memorandum was a petition to Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom to appoint the Queen's Counsel to represent poor Malaysian Indians. According to Syed Husin (2008), the underlying reason was actually the dissatisfactions of the Indian masses with the policies of the ruling class, which they identified as the Malays.

Despite repeated warnings and a court order that allowed the police to arrest the participants, the Hindraf rally saw thousands of Indians taking to the streets of Kuala Lumpur on November 25, 2007. In addition, the rally supported a US\$4 trillion (RM14 trillion) lawsuit by Hindraf against the British government for bringing the Indians to Malaysia as indentured labourers and exploiting them for 150 years. The suit sought a declaration that the Reid Commission Report 1957 failed to incorporate the rights

of the Indian community when independence was granted, resulting in discrimination and marginalisation of the community. The quantum being sought was about US\$1 million for every Indian currently residing in the country.

In December 2007, several prominent members of Hindraf were arrested, some on charges of sedition and five detained without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA). Shortly after Najib Abdul Razak was sworn in as the sixth Prime Minister of Malaysia, two Hindraf leaders were freed among the 13 detainees released from detention under the ISA.

The “Allah” Disputes and Arson Attacks

The Herald is a Catholic weekly newspaper printed in four languages (English, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil) with a circulation of 14,000 and a readership of 850,000 in Malaysia. In January 2009, the Home Ministry approved the publishing permit for *The Herald* on the condition that the word “Allah” is not used in it and the word “Restricted” must be printed on the weekly’s front page, and that it could only be circulated to Christians and at churches only. Subsequently in February 2009, the Chief Bishop of the Kuala Lumpur Roman Catholic, Murphy Pakiam, as the publisher of the newspaper, filed for a judicial review of the Home Ministry ruling on the grounds that the Home Minister had acted beyond his powers and the term “Allah” was not exclusive to Islam. In December 2009, the High Court ruled that *The Herald* had the right to use the word “Allah” but the decision later caused a stir in the country. The Muslims feared that the sanctity of Islam as the official religion would be tarnished and that the word “Allah” will confuse Muslims into becoming Christians. The controversy developed into a series of attacks and vandalism on places of worship, which included churches, mosques and Sikh temples, across the country. The Metro Tabernacle Church in Desa Melawati suffered the most severe damage, which was estimated to be between RM1.5 million and RM2 million. In addition, some Catholic convent schools in the country were targeted with thrown Molotov cocktails too.

The Perceived Value of Silence and Spoken Words in Malaysian Interactions

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ABSTRACT

This paper analysed the perceptions of Malaysians in engaging silence (say nothing) and in using spoken words (talk) as a tool of communication in their daily interactions. Types of topics and situations being discussed were explored in order to detect when silence or words were likely to be used by participants. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to students and staff of three public universities. Of the 656 samples collected, 50% were Chinese, 33% were Malays, 15% were Indians and 2% others. The demography consisted of 199 males and 456 females. SPSS version 18 was used to analyse data and results indicate that the use of silence was more significantly related to issues concerning money and personal affairs. In contrast, the use of spoken words was more significantly related to issues regarding infidelity. These findings are beneficial to researchers who are doing cross cultural studies and in particular, silence. Course designers can thus develop courses which can promote harmony by introducing certain strategies such as silence which, when used appropriately, can help to alleviate misunderstandings.

Keywords: Malaysians, communication, words, silence, cultural differences

1. INTRODUCTION

Silence, in the Asian context, is often eluded because few can appreciate its value as many do not know how to deal with silence. In contrast, silence is cherished in Japanese interactions as it is regarded with respect. During interactions, it is a norm for the Japanese to observe silence. As both parties interact, interlocutors are somehow expected to know what is going on in their respective minds (Wong, 2010). While information may be exchanged, they are usually not explicit. The Japanese people tend to convey only essential information while the “decisive part” of the interaction is restrained. Both parties do not ask for that information and so waiting becomes a

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part of the game where the parties concerned try to figure out mentally what had been said and then decide what to say or do next. This period of waiting in complete silence by the interlocutors is expected as a reaction in Japanese culture, while both parties try to figure out what to say next. Seen as an ambiguous moment, that period of silence is also open for interpretations (Wong, 2010). Correct decoding of that silence can contribute to the continuation of the interaction while an incorrect one can cause a stop to the interaction. From this context, it can be said that precise interpretations of verbal and non-verbal messages encoded in another culture like the Japanese is largely dependent upon one's proficiency in social interactions and worldly experiences which have been gained from exposure to a wide scope of intercultural communications.

Cultural attitude plays a marked role in the decoding and assessing of what has been said or left unsaid as well as in judging someone's use of silence which can take place in many contexts and on many levels. Ajzen (as cited in Lope Pihie and Bagheri, 2011) says that attitude is one of the main factors which can influence one's behaviour. Thus, by being able to understand people's behaviour and perception towards silence across cultures, the ability to decode and predict with precision the respective behaviours in various situations is increased. This simultaneously decreases the likelihood of misunderstanding and such an ideal situation is definitely beneficial to mankind.

1.1 Aim

This study aims to understand when silence or spoken words are used during interactions in the Malaysian context. In particular, it focuses on how participants from the three dominant ethnic groups of Malaysia react to various hypothetical contexts and what would be their preferred choice of communication.

2. COMMUNICATION

Human communication is primarily a means of survival (Maslow, 1954) as it is a process where human beings interact among themselves for the purpose of exchanging meanings and information. Information is given and exchanged but its interpretation is dependent on the participants who come from different backgrounds and have different upbringing, values, beliefs and attitudes. Thus, the structure of a society cannot be divorced from how people communicate among themselves. The Universal Law of Communication indicates that all human beings communicate through a number of ways which encompass movements, sounds, reactions, physical changes, gestures, languages, breath and others (Scudder, 1900).

Communication can be verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication involves the use of spoken words to convey meanings while non-verbal communication depends on body movements, facial expressions and other forms of non-verbal communication. Spoken words, in comparison to written words, are spontaneous and meanings can be easily conveyed and ambiguity can be easily rectified but Davidmann (1998, 2006) argued that the value of words in communication varies considerably in terms of its level of abstraction. Davidmann mentioned that the greater the level of abstraction, the less meaningful the words are to the listener.

2.1 *Silence*

Silence may be non-verbal but it serves many functions (Jaworski, 1993; Lehtonen and Sajavaara, 1985; Tannen, 1985; Nakane, 2007; Wong, 2010). Its usage within a communication exchange depends very much on the interlocutors' cultural background, socio-competence experience and their perception or understanding of what silence may mean in their respective culture or daily practices. In the organizational context, for instance, the attitude of individuals (e.g. top management and supervisors) towards silence can create an ambience that "encourage or discourage the enactment of silence behaviour by employees" according to Okey and Chiwuba (2008: 9), who also suggested that there is a reciprocal link between silence and work attitudes.

Silence is not a universal value (Tannen, 1985; Samovar and Porter, 2001) because cultures like the Jewish, Italian and Arabic observe very little silence in their conversations while the North American (US) culture finds silence stressful (Giles, Coupland and Wiemann, 1992). In contrast, eastern cultures like Japan, Korea and China (Kim, 1999) value and treat silence as a way of preserving harmony in social groups (Barnlund, 1989; Nakane, 2007).

Among easterners, verbal expressions such as arguments are synonymous to "an activity of dubious value that can lead to anger and unreasonable behaviour" (Cheng and Tardy, 2009: 35). The scholars claimed that a quiet person is viewed more favourably than a loquacious person who is perceived to be insincere. There is more favour given to a taciturn person since meanings can be sensed through silence (Cheng and Tardy, 2009). This perceived silence is linked to the Japanese *haragei* (wordless communication), Korean *noon chi* and Chinese *mo chi* (tacit understanding). The tacit knowledge of the Chinese has been interpreted by Cheng and Tardy (2009) as a conduct of self-restraint and self-discipline where harmony is maintained by deliberate measures. By remaining silent, the "face" of the other party can be preserved. Chen (2002) concurred when he highlighted that silence may be seen as a means to accomplish a certain goal. Nonetheless, these studies merely explain when silence is acknowledged by the participants. They do not describe to us the situations in which silence is observed.

2.2 *Positive and Negative Values of Silence*

Silence conveys both positive and negative values. Silence may be perceived as good behaviour and also as a rude or impolite gesture (Sifianou, 1997), as a sign of active learning and concentration or as a sign of laziness or ignorance in the educational setting (Jaworski, 1999) and in organizational contexts, silence may imply weak followers who lack motivation (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Thus, silence is perceived as a symptom of stress and isolation (Jenkins, 2000). Marrison and Milliken (2000), for instance, suggested that employees' silence may be a hindrance to an organization's endeavour to leverage its employees to achieve excellent performance. Such a taciturn behaviour is viewed negatively because it is seen as the preference of employees to withhold their opinions when problems arise at work (Okey and Chiwuba, 2008). This may prove to be dangerous as the more members accept this silent behaviour as a core organizational value, the lesser their commitment will be towards their organisation.

To resolve this matter, managers are advised to improve their work attitude and lessen their silent behaviour (Okey and Chiwuba, 2008). In addition, silence is also viewed as a failure of language (Tannen, 1985 as cited in Jaworski, 2000) or as a chance for self-exploration (Allen, 1978). Nonetheless, silence conveys different values depending on cultures. Wong (2010), for instance, claimed that silence can be eclectic since it can be taken as a moment of thoughtfulness or contemplation which is defined as a mental inactivity with others. In some situations, silence may also be used to demonstrate anger, disgust or uncertainty while in other contexts, participants interacting among themselves may remain silent because they need to ponder over a statement made by another party. People may remain silent as they contemplate on their next move. When people withdraw from participating, silence may also ensue. Thus, it appears that silence in human interactions could bear contrasting values such as bonding or dividing people, healing emotional wounds, revealing or hiding information or showing assent and favour or dissent and disfavour (Jensen, 1973).

2.3 *Close and Distant Relationships*

People behave differently in different situations to suit the atmosphere of their conversations. For instance, some may refrain from articulating what they want to say if they think that what they are going to say will spoil the harmony of the interaction. In interpersonal communication, emotion becomes a response which one uses in reacting to a particular stimulus, or as a socially constructed phenomenon based on the adaptations of one's perspective (Gopinath, 2011). Those who declare their emotions freely say what they want to say regardless of situations but they may be perceived as people who lack social common sense, particularly in public where many are strangers or in situations involving parties of distant relationships (e.g. acquaintances, colleagues, bosses). In service industries, the display of appropriate emotions at front counters is of importance for customers who support a particular industry (Salovey and Mayer, 1990 as cited in Gopinath, 2011).

Culture can affect the display and recognition of emotion in terms of how, when, in what social context and by whom (Porter and Samovar, 1998). Nonetheless, through a process of socialisation, people also learn to communicate their emotions either by expressing or inhibiting them. A common phenomenon in interactions is that the display of emotions is more allowable between people in close relationships (e.g. family members or spouse).

Andersen and Guerrero (1998) explained that some emotional expressions which are manifested in public situations do not necessarily present themselves in private situations and such emotional expressions serve as forms of interpersonal communication rather than as expressions of internal feelings only. Coining the word "channelling" to indicate a process of selective displays of certain emotions in particular situations or contexts, Andersen and Guerrero (1998) added that the British, for instance, perceive public display of emotion as distasteful. The British regard those with higher education to be rational and better at dealing with emotions. Consequently, they assume a reserved attitude in the public eye, especially when

emotion becomes an issue. However, there is more room for emotional expression and open disagreement among family members and close friends (Wong, 2010). This implies that the British use spoken words more when they are with someone who is close to them. This characteristic of the British is contrary to Japanese married couples who need less spoken words in conveying their needs and messages because telepathic communication works effectively for them. Encoding and decoding messages through non-verbal means such as silence is possible between Japanese couples (Wong, 2005). Even if she is suspected of adultery, the wife prefers to wait until her husband is ready to confess the truth before she confronts the husband directly (Wong, 2005).

3. COMMUNICATION STYLES OF MALAYSIANS

Communication is about social interactions and is based on respective assumptions as stated by Lokasundari (2009). Thus, in looking at the communication styles of Malaysians, one cannot deny that the observations and analyses could also be based on assumptions but by using evidence drawn from studies, such assumptions are thereby confirmed.

Most studies have described Malaysians as indirect people but it should be mentioned that such a description is more relevant to the Malays (David and Kuang, 1999, 2005; Jamaliah, 2000; Thilagavathi, 2003). Part of the Malay conduct involves being non-confrontational (Asrul, 2003) and *berbudi-bahasa* or courteous (Asmah, 1992, 1993; Kamisah and Norazlan, 2003; Asrul, 2003). Malaysians are generally group-oriented people and are collectivistic in nature (Hofstede, 1984; Asma, 1992) but they also have some distinctive differences in their behaviour due to their different culture, religion, beliefs, values as well as upbringing.

Littlejohn (2002) stated that human beings respond to various contexts in different ways and individuals are more or less governed by their cultural backgrounds when dealing with certain aspects of communication. In that regard, it is possible that their behavioural patterns could have been influenced by certain underlying values which were acquired from their upbringing (Littlejohn, 2002) as well as exposure to other values. Some common values which are still intact among the Malays include respect for elders, respect for authority, preservation of face and maintaining hierarchy and harmony (Hofstede, 1984; Asma, 1992).

A common feature of the Malays is their indirectness (Asmah, 1992, 1993; David, Kuang and Zuraidah, 2002; Thilagavathi, 2003) and their avoidance of conflicts and confrontations (Asrul, 2003). Another Malay characteristic is its good upbringing which is demonstrated via courteousness (Asmah, 1992; Jamaliah, 1995) which is synonymous with being polite. However, irrespective of the traditional heritage, behaviours can also change as people adapt to technological and economical changes. Lailawati (2005) found that some Malays have moved on from being collectivistic to being more individualistic.

Malaysian Chinese, in comparison, are descendants of 17th and 19th century migrants. Early Chinese migrants often withdrew from interacting with the locals for various reasons, one of which was to avoid trouble (Ling, 1995), but the current

generation of Malaysian Chinese lead a different lifestyle. Many are nuclear family oriented and do not live with extended families like before. In addition, many have also become more prosperous, gained education both locally and abroad and are more open-minded unlike their ancestors. Thus, their lifestyles and attitudes would be markedly different from that of their ancestors. These differences are manifested in the way they interact, behave and socialise. However, certain traditional values such as filial piety and deference for elders acquired from Confucian teachings (Ling, 1995) are still widely practised. Historically, Chinese people place a lot of value on “face” (Chan, 2006; Shi, Furukawa, Jin and Zhu, 2010). Any incident within the family that brings shame and embarrassment are often not discussed in public. Previous studies of the Malaysian Chinese indicate that they are direct and upfront (David and Kuang, 1999, 2005; Kuang, 2007; Kuang and David, 2009) in their communication styles. However, Lim and Syed (1997) found that their Chinese respondents had a higher need for affiliation than their Malay colleagues while handling intracultural and interpersonal conflicts in a business context. The Chinese managers in their study wanted to maintain harmony instead of alienating themselves in a conflict. From these results, we can see variations in the way Malaysian Chinese react in particular situations.

Malaysian Indians are the smallest ethnic group of the country but they are made up of Tamils, Telugus, Malayalam, Punjabis and other subgroups. There are very few reports about the communication styles of Malaysian Indians but some studies (Jamaliah, 2000; Suraiya, 2002) carried out on young Malaysian Indians in universities indicate that they are generally polite and indirect. Nonetheless, their communication style may depend on their social status and professional backgrounds (David and Kuang, 1999, 2005) as some Indian professionals were found to be very direct. To date, no studies have shown them to be more voluble or more taciturn and no study has looked at silence as a part of the three dominant groups’ communication style or features. Thus, the findings of this study will help to fill this literature gap.

4. METHODOLOGY

The perceived responses of 656 Malaysians who were given hypothetical contexts to define whether silence or spoken words would be used in communicating certain responses were extracted from a self-administered questionnaire which was adapted from Wong’s (2005) model. Wong (2005) had studied the use of silence amongst British and Japanese participants in her work but in the present study, the respondents were Malaysians between the ages of 19 to 60 years. The majority of them were students and staff of three public universities located in the Klang Valley, Selangor. A total of 25 questions with some consisting of sub-questions were developed for the questionnaire and responses were guided by the Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, mildly disagree and strongly disagree). Open-ended questions were also included in order to gauge the explanation provided by respondents. On average, each questionnaire would require 30 minutes to complete. The questionnaires were administered in stages over approximately three months and respondents consisted of 50% Chinese, 33% Malays,

15% Indians and 2% others. The SPSS version 18 was used to quantify our findings. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the survey and that results would be shared once published. Responses to five specific questions were extracted, tabulated and quantified for this paper. The analysis is presented in histograms and percentages were derived from the frequency of the choices made by the respondents.

4.1 Justification

The responses of 656 Malaysians can serve as a good representation of the way the majority of Malaysians think in response to particular contexts. Our response rates matched the recommendation made by McCracken (1988) who indicated that a quantitative research provides information on how the general population think about and experience the world and that it would require a larger sample and particular type of questions which can be used to generalize a larger population.

Pliner, Blankstein and Spigel (1979) also stated that self-reporting methods provide data on people's inner state which cannot be obtained by other means. Their argument was based on the assumption that every individual has a personal theory of reality and that the theory is not developed with a conscious intent but arises, unwittingly, in the course of living. Since this theory is not an explicit theory, it would be best to infer it from behaviour, particularly emotional reactions. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the respondents by ethnic group and age.

Table 1: Breakdown of respondents

Ethnic groups	Male	Female	Total
Chinese	96	230	326 (49.8%)
Malays	83	145	228 (34.8%)
Indians	20	81	101(15.4%)
Total	199 (30.4%)	456 (69.4%)	661 (5 missing values = 656)

4.2 Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the theoretical framework of social constructionism which considers all forms of communication including silence as being socially constructed and historically and culturally situated (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Taking the process of communication as the means where members of a society share and create meanings for themselves, social constructionism thus considers the way something is said can determine the way the message is conceived and interpreted. It also posits that truth and ideas are constructed as a result of the social process of interacting with each other. Craig (2001: 125) describes this as "...an ongoing process that symbolically forms and re-forms our personal identities". Social constructionism suggests that "... in human life, information does not behave simply as bits in an electronic stream, information flow is far more like an electric current running from one landmine to another" (Lanham, 2003: 7). It is more realistic because it concerns real people interacting among themselves, sharing their thoughts and ideas freely. Likewise,

Chandler (1994: 2) stated that “humans do not communicate simply as computers or robots”. Instead, they gather facts and data by acquiring meaning through the process of communication or through interaction with others.

As a multiethnic and multicultural society, the identities of Malaysians are constructed through social consensus and self-reflection via the help of language (Gergen, 1994). The use of language and its effects, whether verbal or non-verbal, are vital ingredients to social constructionism. From the linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives, we can say that all forms of communication, including silence, can depict pragmatic meanings and silence can be an extremely powerful communicative tool as it can account for as many meanings in communication as those of spoken words (Jaworski, 1993).

5. ANALYSIS OF DATA

The development of the discussion is based on five questions selected from the questionnaire. The responses to these five questions shed light on situations in which silence or words may be used. Figure 1 illustrates the statistics for the three ethnic groups of Malay, Chinese and Indian who claim to observe silence. Question 1 asks: “What topics being discussed (e.g. matters related to money) are likely to create silence as a response?” The discussion for this is provided under the subsequent heading.

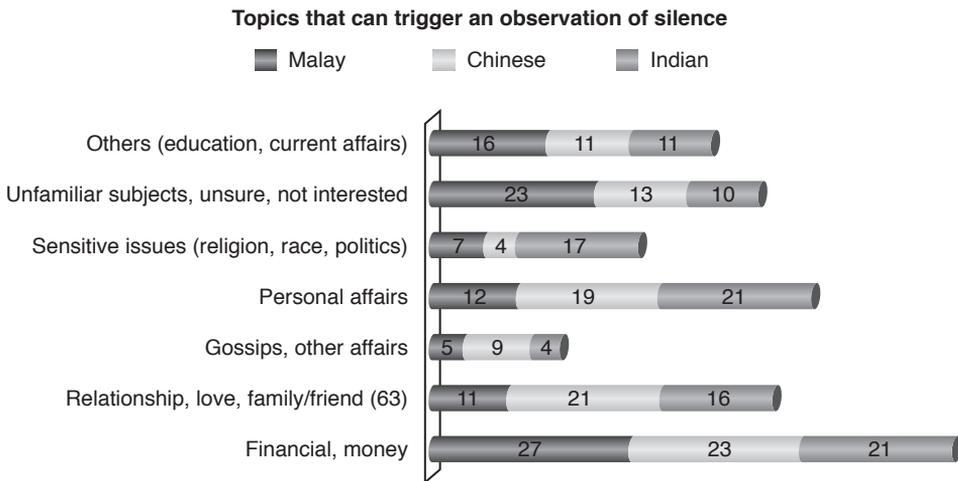


Figure 1. Responses showing topics that can trigger an observation of silence

5.1 Topics that can Trigger Silence

This question focuses on the results of the three highly rated topics. In issues pertaining to “financial issue/money”, statistics show that 27% Malay respondents, 23% Chinese respondents and 21% Indian respondents claim to observe silence. Their behaviour could have been induced by their cultural background which avoids confrontational

topics involving “financial” and “relationship” issues. Thus, silence was used as a non-confrontational strategy. It is also possible that these issues involved a lot of “face threats” (Kim, 1999; Cheng and Tardy, 2009) which can damage relationships if not handled amicably, hence keeping silent alleviates the need to confront and argue.

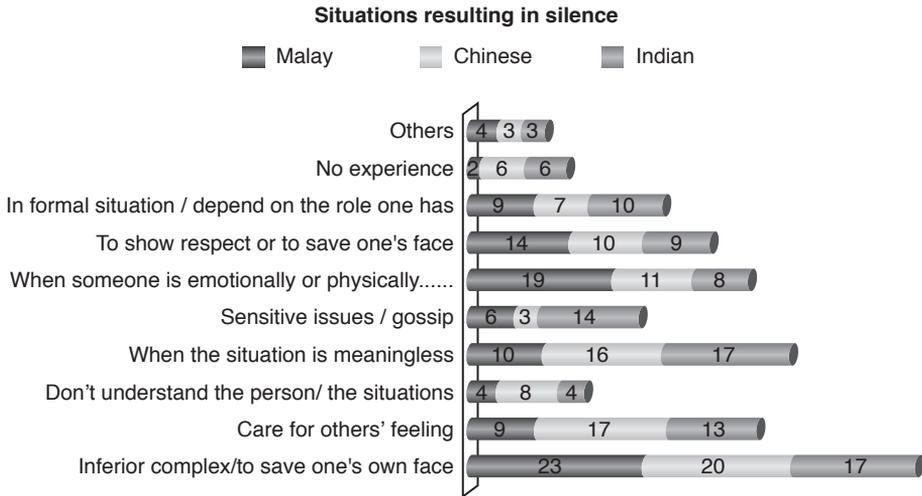


Figure 2. Responses showing situations resulting in silence

5.2 Situations that can Trigger Silence

Figure 2 provides nine hypothetical situations which could trigger silence. Although the percentage of respondents claiming to observe silence is small, it nevertheless shows that silence is a useful tool in these situations. Our findings suggest that the cultural upbringing and values instilled in Malaysians in their upbringing (Asma, 1992; Lim and Syed, 1997) may be the main reason why all the three ethnic groups observed silence in similar situations. From the analysis, it appears that silence was used when respondents feel “inferior” and this is interpreted as a “face-saving” strategy. Statistics in Figure 2 indicate that 23% Malay respondents, 19% Chinese respondents and 17% Indian respondents would observe silence when having a low level of confidence. Thus, the notion of “face” shown here is important to all three ethnic groups. Additionally, 17% Indian respondents and 16% Chinese respondents used silence as a tool of communication during moments when “situations seem meaningless”. In these hypothetical situations, Malaysians observed silence to avoid dead-end discussions.

Silence was observed by 14% Malays to bypass confrontations and show respect to others. Such a behaviour was also noted in Lope Pihie and Bagheri (2011), where Malay respondents scored low in a survey focusing on their self-esteem in business. This was interpreted as a lack of self-confidence. In the context of this study, when the Malay respondents observed silence, it was to refrain from talking with an emotionally

unstable interlocutor. Thus, it was an avoidance strategy which was to steer clear of conflicts (Asrul, 2003). It is observed that when people are confronted with the need to do the right thing or wrong thing, a lot of emotions such as guilt and shame are involved (News Scan, 2011) and this emotion could have possibly affected the Malay respondents' choice of behaviour. Kraus added that "It's not something ingrained in the individual, it's the cultural contexts which lead to these differences" (News Scan, 2011: 733).

Among the Chinese, silence was probably observed as a way to self-reflect, self-restraint and self-discipline (Kim, 1999; Cheng and Tardy, 2009) since silence alleviates the need to talk as 20% of them had observed silence to save their own face. It is also possible that silence was engaged as a way of remaining "aloof" like a *junzi* (Yu, 2009) which means a great man who is fast of action and slow of words. As the notion of "face" is still an important issue to the Chinese, keeping silent was probably one way to maintain self-dignity, thereby abating shame and embarrassment. Being silent in situations where talk is meaningless is also practical as it saves time by not talking.

Findings indicate that Indian respondents observed silence when in situations of being inferior and when it involves sensitive issues (17% and 14%, respectively). This is probably due to their lack of ability to respond appropriately since many of us have not been trained to deal with the negative impact of such situations. It is also probable that silence was observed as an act of humility, an important aspect of the Indian culture. In this regard, silence was used as a device to reflect harmony.

5.3 When Words are Used

Data for this section were derived from three questions asked in the questionnaire. The first question asked "Whom do you talk to first when encountering problems at work/ or in your studies?" Findings are presented in Figure 3.

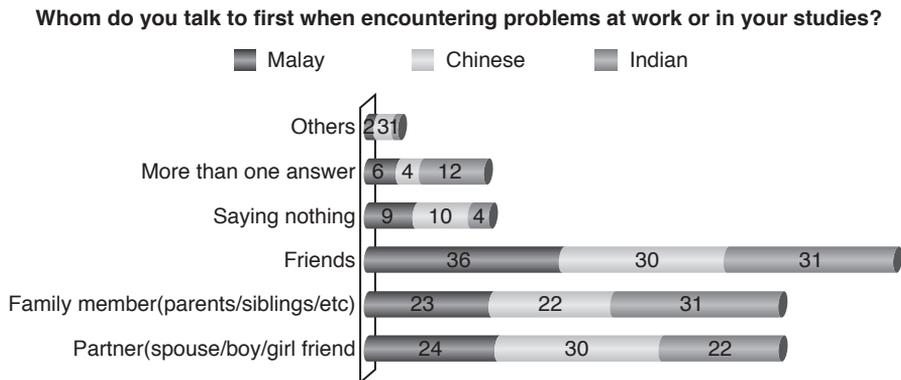


Figure 3. Responses for the question, "Whom do you talk to first when encountering problems at work or in your studies?"

The responses therefore illustrate when spoken words were used and with whom. Statistics indicate that Malaysians have a range of support. When faced with problems, many claimed to talk (spoken words) to “friends” before going to “family members” and finally “partners”. However, there are some variations in preference among the three ethnic groups.

If the response “say nothing” is to be taken as an expression of silence, then it could be seen that only 9% Malays, 10% Chinese and 4% Indians opted for silence. The majority claimed to express themselves verbally. When encountering problems at work or in studies, 36% Malays would talk to their friends, 24% to their partners and 23% to their family members. In comparison, 30% Chinese preferred to talk to their friends, 30% to their partners and only 22% may talk to their family members. Likewise, 31% Indians choose to talk to their friends, 31% to their family members while 22% preferred to talk to their partners.

The above data imply that all the three ethnic groups do not vary very much in their reliance for support. “Friends” is the first preference for all the three groups when having problems at work or in studies. Among the Chinese and Malays, “partners” were second choice and “family members” came last. In contrast, Indians preferred to talk with their “family members” more and their “partners” would be their last choice. From this result, we can deduce that the Chinese and Malays approach their “partners” for support and this in return, alleviates the need to burden their family members. It appears that Indians trust their family members more when encountering problems at work/in studies, thus reducing their burden on “partners”.

The next question asks: “Whom do you talk to first when you are emotionally depressed?” Figure 4 illustrates the findings.

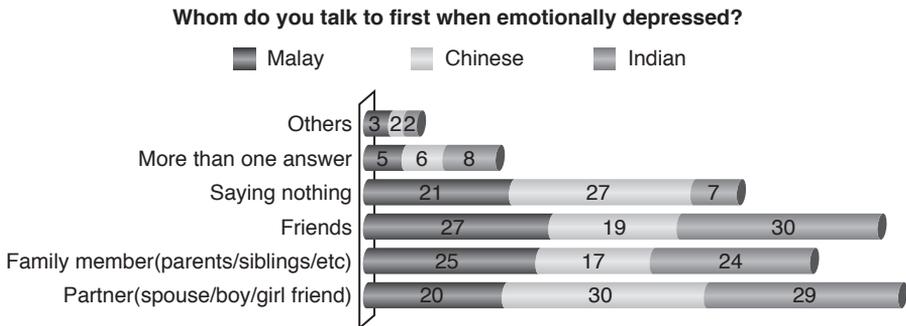


Figure 4. Responses for the question, “Whom do you talk to first when emotionally depressed?”

In such a hypothetical situation, the responses of the Malaysian respondents varied, showing a significant difference among the three ethnic groups ($X^2(10) = 30.0, p < 0.001$).

At this stage of analysis, it appears that more Chinese respondents would “say nothing” (27%) when compared to the Malays and Indians. From Figure 3, we can

see that the Chinese were more inclined towards confiding in “friends” and “partners” when encountering problems at work/studies. However, in situations where they were emotionally depressed, the percentage of talking to “friends” dropped by almost half (from 30% to 19%) although the percentage of talking to “partners” remained unchanged (30%). With regard to such hypothetical situations, this implies that silence (saying nothing) has become their preferred choice when they encounter emotional problems.

Likewise, the Malays showed the same tendency in resorting to silence when they were emotionally depressed. The only distinction between the two ethnic groups is that Malays talked to their “friends” more than their “partners” in this particular situation. The Indians talked more to their “partners” when they were emotionally depressed (change from 22% to 29%). A slight increment, from 4% to 7%, was also found in the category of “say nothing” for the Indians. On the whole, it can be deduced that the tendency for Malaysians to resort to silence increased when they were emotionally depressed as compared to when they encountered problems at work or in their studies.

The next question attempted to detect what Malaysians think they may do in another hypothetical situation, “What do you do if you suspect your partner/spouse of having an affair?” Figure 5 illustrates the findings.



Figure 5. Responses to the question, “What do you do if you suspect your partner/spouse of having an affair?”

In this question, four alternatives were presented to the respondents:

- (a) ask directly (being confrontational)
- (b) use mediator (being indirect)
- (c) hire detective (get indirect help to gather proof)
- (d) do nothing and wait (use silence)

The results show that the response “others” in Figure 5 was highly rated. This is probably because approximately 70% of the respondents are still single. It seems that a hypothetical and difficult situation of this nature is more likely to provoke the use of spoken words than silence. Most respondents claimed that they would confront

their “partners/spouses”. Among the four options provided, “talk” (spoken words) or “say nothing” (silence) was highly rated by the Chinese respondents. This finding reveals the trait of self-restraint. The analysis shows that 16% Chinese claimed that they would “wait and see” in contrast to only 9% Malays and 5% Indians. Data thus imply that Malaysians vary in their choices of strategies. As stated by Hilton and Earnest (2010) and Reid and Vogel (2006), the effectiveness of coping strategies could be determined by many factors such as personal, cultural and social as well as socio-economic conditions (Paul and Routray, 2010).

5.4 Silence in Close Relationships

Although not every culture observes the practice that the closer the relationship, the more people talk, it is a given that those who are close in their relationships would want to share more stories or information with each another. The Japanese, for example, use more non-verbal gestures to communicate within close relationships (Saville-Troike, 1985) and North Americans prefer to fill in “air-time” (Lehtonen & Saravaaja, 1985). The communication style of Malaysians in close relationships is an intriguing topic. Figure 6 shows the results on this topic.

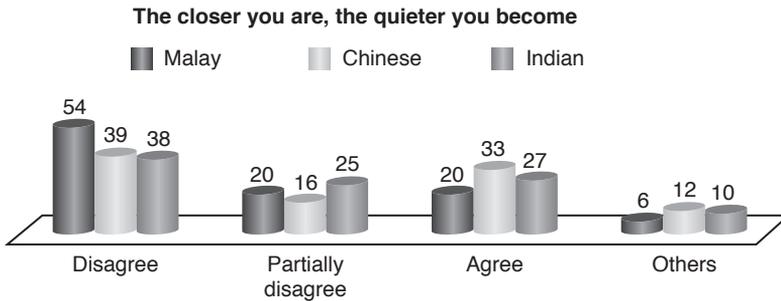


Figure 6. Responses for the statement, “The closer you are, the quieter you become”

A significant difference ($\chi^2(6) = 18.5, p < 0.005$) was found among the three ethnic groups in relation to the statement, “the closer you are, the quieter you become”. About a third or 33% Chinese agreed with the statement, 16% partially agreed and 39% disagreed. In comparison, 27% Indians agreed with the statement, 25% partially agreed and 38% disagreed whilst 20% Malays agreed with the statement, 20% partially agreed, and 54% disagreed with the statement.

In this context, it seems that more Chinese think that “when you know someone very well, lesser (spoken) words are required” and this may be substantiated by the reason “because you understand each other” (Kim, 1999; Cheng and Tardy, 2009). This finding is interpreted as having the ability to think that “meanings can be sensed from the communication process” (Cheng and Tardy, 2009). In responding to this particular context, the Malays opted for the talkative mode (spoken words) when their relationship

with others becomes closer. Findings on the Indians do not show an obvious variation but statistics indicate that spoken words were preferred as a means of conveying messages to others.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this paper provide some pertinent answers which could help disclose the type of topics and situations that can influence multiethnic Malaysians to observe silence or use spoken words. Our situations were based on hypothetical contexts and our analyses were drawn from the responses provided. We did not focus on the non-verbal aspects. Our findings indicate that most Malaysians appear to opt for silence when emotionally depressed and when faced with “money” issues. This finding suggests that “money issue” is something many Malaysians find difficult to talk about as it involves face-saving. If respondents were unable to say the right thing during a discussion, a “good relationship” could be jeopardized. Hence, to preserve that relationship, care has to be applied and in the context of our study, silence became the preferred choice of communication among a majority of the Malaysians. This characteristic was highlighted in Zafar, Asif and Qureshi’s (2002) study when their Pakistani respondents were found to avoid discussing family issues such as spending money, happenings in society or the number of children to have because of their cultural background. The findings of our study also reveal that spoken words may be a useful tool of communication in difficult situations such as when experiencing problems at work or in studies, and when suspecting one’s partner or spouse of infidelity. However, the choice of using silence or spoken words may be dependent on a few factors such as the cultural norm of the ethnic groups concerned, the closeness of their relationship with others and the situations arising from their interactions.

From the findings presented, we can conclude that in the Malaysian context, spoken words were needed by the Malays and the Indians who apply them to indicate close relationship, find solutions when having problems at work or in studies and in critical moments of suspected infidelity. Of the three ethnic groups, it appears that spoken words were most used by the Indians as a tool of communication whilst silence was more prevalent among the Chinese who probably used it as a veil to inhibit personal emotions and as a sign of close relationship. This finding is in tandem with the Japanese notion of silence which is used as a marker of close relationships – “the closer they are, the quieter they become” (Wong, 2010). The Chinese respondents exhibited this preference more than the other two ethnic groups. This unusual nature of the Malaysian Chinese can be attributed to their easterner characteristic (Kim, 1999) where mutual understanding could be gained through their ability to sense meanings rather than verbalize them. We hope to verify this claim in our future work based on interviews.

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Critical Analysis Of Multiphrenia and Identity in Two Selected Malaysian Novels

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ABSTRACT

The texts that have been selected to analyse multiphrenia and identity issues are *Green is the Color* by Lloyd Fernando and *Mr. Tang's Girls* by Shirley Lim. In this paper, I discuss how post-modern characteristics of self-creation define the protagonist's identity while in the second novel, I explore the influence of patriarchal society on the shaping of the protagonist's identity. The patriarchal society for which the protagonist's father is an example is considered the 'other' as seen in Burke and Stets' (2009) 'the nature of the individual depends upon the society in which he or she lives'.

Keywords: Identity, multiphrenia, patriarchy, oppression

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's oppression and suppression is a recurring theme in literature; some like the Red Stockings (a New York-based women's group) believed that men are primarily responsible for women's oppression, an oppression that has lasted for centuries. Hester believes that men are primarily responsible for women's oppression and it is men, rather than capitalism or society, who benefit from the system of male-female social relations where women as a group are kept subordinate to men (1995). However, the author goes on to mention in the book, *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches*, that women should also take the blame for their own oppression. Irrespective of the cause for oppression, we have been struggling with it since the dawn of time. On the one hand, men have always been considered the superior sex. They are physically stronger than women, who find themselves being pressurized into doing chores around the house. They are also identified as the breadwinners of the family. Men go to work outside the home and have held most of the major jobs until recently. Men have always made the ultimate decisions in the family and were defined as independent beings in *The Impact of Modern-Day Polygamy on Women and Children*:

Before a woman is married, she has value as property bringing her father influence, power, and prestige within the cult. She is "groomed" for her relationship with the man who will be her husband. Her sole purpose is to please her husband by doing what gives him pleasure or satisfaction. She has no right to complain about abuse or injustice. (Burke and Stets, 2009: 102)

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The male children were given more attention and freedom than the female ones: “Though children of both sexes are equally valued in a family, both sexes are not given the same cultural evaluation: Male is very clearly viewed as superior to female. Some mothers tend to view their male children as fussier, more independent, more active, and more aggressive than their female children from birth” (Oboler, 1985:58).

Although it might sound like a bit of a hyperbole for the twenty-first century, male domination still exists even in the most modern societies in different forms. It is true that females have started some feminist movements, but despite all the rights claimed thus far, they are still identified and controlled by men. A look at the literary works written by women or about women reveals that female suppression has always been an issue. In most of these works, the female writer or the protagonist is battling hard to find her identity in the male-centered society. It is believed that “all people derive particular identities from their roles in society, the groups they belong to, and their personal characteristics” (Burke and Stets, 2009). In the following sections, the two texts which are discussed present female characters who battle patriarchy as they are surrounded by male characters who try to suppress and oppress them through male dominancy. The female characters struggle with not being able to shape their identities as an individual human being apart from their male counterparts.

2. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

2.1 *Mr. Tang's Girls*

This is the story of four girls in the second family of Ah Kong, an affluent but insensitive and traditional father, who fails to cope with the growing sexuality of the eldest girl (Quayum, 2007). Kim Li, the oldest daughter of Mr. Tang is a victim of her father's tendency to rule the family. He is the epitome of a typical Chinese father in a patriarchal society; his behavior around the house is not conducive to the proper shaping of his family members' characters, especially his oldest daughter, Kim Li. Coming from a deep-rooted male chauvinism culture, he tries and to some extent succeeds in wielding the whip and forcing unfair impositions upon his family when he is around. This can be seen in *Prize-winning Asian Fiction*: “On Saturdays, the girls stayed home. No school activity, no friends, no parties, no shopping trips. Nothing took them out of the house. Their suppressed giggles, lazy talk, muted movements and uncertain sighs constituted his sense of home. And every Saturday, the four girls played their part: they became daughters whose voices were to be heard like cheerful music in the background, but never loudly or intrusively” (Comber, 1991: 87).

Before going any further with the effects of his behavior on Kim Li's identity, an in-depth psychoanalysis of Mr. Tang's behavior is provided next.

2.1.1 *Mr. Tang*

Mr Tang appears to display certain dysfunctional behaviors as a member of the patriarchal society where character shaping is highly affected by the patriarchy system. He has learnt that it is a normal thing to control your family because his father might have given him this false impression through his own behavior. Murray (1995: 37) stated that the most influential exponent of the dual system approach describes patriarchy as

“a set of social relations between men which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enables them to dominate women”.

Engineer (1992) concurred that for thousands of years, women were kept in total subjugation in patriarchal societies. Thus for centuries, it was considered a natural law that women were inferior to men and must submit to the latter's authority to ensure that family life runs smoothly.

Mr. Tang's girls never feel at ease when their father is around. Their 'suppressed giggles, lazy talk, muted movements and uncertain sighs constituted his sense of home' (Comber, 1991: 87). The only daughter who plucked up enough courage to fight her father's dominance was Kim Li as is evident on pages 88-89. The father is surprised as to why his daughters' clothes do not fit them anymore and they are in need of new clothes; his wife then answers him quite cautiously, that girls grow up fast and their clothes become too small for them within six months (Comber, 1991). The other daughters except Kim Li imitate their mother and are painstakingly circumspect not to incense their father. One says that she has not had a new dress since Chinese New Year while another says that she has grown three inches in one year. His wife prevails upon him by saying that his daughters are becoming women. However, Kim Li alone uses an aggressive voice which keeps everyone tight-lipped, while Kim Mee (another daughter of his) is furious because Ah Kong's face is reddening (Comber, 1991). All the girls (except Kim Li) and the wife have gotten used to living within the law of the father and do not dare to fight the losing battle of opposing him. The father wants to keep a tight rein on them. He shudders at the thought of his children growing up and destabilizing his patriarchy. This is how he develops the *defense of denial*.

Tyson (1999) explained that the storehouse of painful experiences and emotions, wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts that we do not want to know is unconscious because, otherwise, we will be overwhelmed by them. The unconscious comes into being when we are very young. Furthermore, he goes on to say that defensiveness is the process by which the contents of the unconscious are kept unconscious. It is a process by which we keep feelings repressed in order to avoid knowing what we feel and what we cannot handle knowing.

A strategy used in believing that a problem does not exist or an unpleasant incident never took place is called denial (Tyson, 1999). The father denies that his daughters are growing up and he hates this fact when he witnesses it. Once as he was walking past his daughters' bedrooms at night, catching sight of his daughters sleeping, he saw Kim Mee sleeping curled against her bolster. In a filling baby doll dress, her haunches curved and enveloped the pillow like a woman with her lover. He hated the sight. Mr. Tang wanted his children to belong to him, depend on his homecoming, and fall sleep in his presence, innocent and pure (Comber, 1991). Furthermore, he greatly revels in tea time where the family's mask of happiness and good behavior is put on for him. He does not want it to end and he expresses this fear through denial.

“Every Saturday they made high tea at five. The girls peeled hard-boiled eggs..... Ah Kong would eat only fresh bread.....,but he enjoyed watching his daughters eat like European mems...Saturday tea was when he considered himself a successful

father and fed on the vision of his four daughters eating toast.....while his quiet wife poured tea by his side” (Comber,1991). Kim Li ruins his enjoyment and wishes by opposing him. Not being able to stand Kim Li’s odd behavior which is the direct result of his patriarchal behavior on her, he tries to marry her off to one of his assistants as his second wife (Quayum, 2007). It is assuredly obvious the amount of effort that he puts in trying to command the family. He knows that his family pretends to be happy around him while suppressing their true feelings when he is around, but he makes no effort to relieve the tension by getting emotionally close to them. This is what Freud calls as *avoidance*. It is another form of defense. Tyson (1999) stated that staying away from people or situations that are liable to make us anxious by stirring up some unconscious or repressed experience or emotion is called avoidance.

The father avoids close emotional attachment to his daughters in order to avoid confronting his unconscious and repressed emotions. The defenses of *avoidance* and *denial* practiced by Ah Kong are his endless efforts to be authoritative. He continues although he fails as far as his oldest daughter is concerned and his constant need to be authoritative is the reason why Kim Li’s identity morphs into a rebellious child. As mentioned before, each person derives particular identities from their roles in society, the groups they belong to, and their personal characteristics (Burke and Stets, 2009). Kim Li’s father was rarely present due to the fact that he was polygamous and spent most of his time in his first wife’s house. Kim Li’s family was his second family. Every Friday, he drove down from Kuala Lumpur, where his first wife and children lived, in time for dinner and stayed only for the weekend (Comber, 1991). Kim Li’s identity is not shaped separately from her father’s behavior. In fact, she cannot develop her true self until the end of the story because it is directly affected by her father and his domineering behavior. An analysis of Kim Li’s identity is provided in the following section.

2.1.2 *Kim Li*

Kim Li usually opposes her father without being washed over by fear. Kim Li has some unresolved conflicts growing up in a patriarchal family. This is made clear from “The patriarchal family is the institution through which repression and oppression are internalized within the individual psyche.” The reason for these unresolved conflicts can also stem from not receiving enough love from her father. Her father has spread himself too thin, being married to two wives and managing two families, so he does not and cannot devote enough time to both of them. He only spends two days with his second wife and their daughters. All children need their parents’ attention and constant care and when these are deprived, they repress their feelings. The gap between the father and daughter in this short story is further widened when he selects a husband for her without even telling her. These repressed feelings and emotions become manifested in different forms. Kim Li displays them in disguised, distorted, and self-defeating ways which are shown in different parts of the story. On page 86, we read, “She suffered from unpredictable moods which had recently grown more savage” (Comber, 1991). When his wife told him how Kim Li had taken to the news of her arranged marriage, she had said that she was afraid Kim Li would yell and

scream. She told him that he was not aware of the tantrums she can throw. However, in this instance, Kim Li took the news very calmly (Comber, 1991). This suggests that she normally argues vehemently and is prone to yelling and shouting when displeased. The parents do not seem to be aware that the ulterior motive behind this calmness is the plan that Kim Li has hatched to kill her father at the end of the story. The short shorts she wears, the heavy make-up she applies, the aggressive tone of hers and in the end and in its most destructive form, the murder of her father are all examples of how she expresses her repressed feelings in distorted, disguised and self-defeating ways.

Kim Li's struggle to shape her identity and her true self apart from the influence of her father is littered throughout the pages of the story. She struggles to free herself from the influence of her patriarchal and polygamous father in order to be able to form a consistent, independent true self. The *indecent* way of her clothing (in the context of time and space), smoking, her aggressive tone, and her strange moods are the tools she uses to oppose her father in order to find her true self.

2.2 *Green Is the Color*

The main character of the novel is a Malay woman called Sara. As Dr Wong Soak Koon (Fernando, 2004) highlighted in the introduction of the book, it appears that the author, Fernando gave prominence to the female character, Siti Sara. A large portion of the last segment of the novel is told in her first-person narrative or through her unconscious self. Sara's identity is analyzed from a post-modernistic view of the self. It is believed that a post-modernist self is *socially constructed*.

Wade (2001) says that a person is defined by the societal values, language, arts, entertainment and other aspects of life that he or she grows up with. We do not have fixed identities which is separable from our surroundings and which remain the same even though certain characteristics and circumstances may change. We are simply influenced by the people that we come into contact every day and even by the trivial changes that they trigger in our lives. According to post-modernists, it is wrong to assume that individuals' identities are separated from that of the people around them. In this novel, Sara's identity is created through a mobilization of *self* and *other*.

The men around her influenced her identity to a great extent and tried to gain control of her life. Many unpredictable things happened in Sara's life. For one, when her husband Omar, comes back from a tour with some Iranians and Pakistani students, his behavior has changed; he does not treat his wife well and manipulates her for his sexual satisfaction; then secondly, he asks her to move to a village called Jerangau where he believes the real Islam is practiced and life is simple. Thirdly, she is also influenced by Yun Ming (the man she loves), her father, and Panglima (the man who tries to obtain Sara ever since she was a child).

After the riots of May 1969, the Malaysian society was in a state of chaos and disorder. It was a difficult period for the three races to practice their religious, cultural and social beliefs and live side by side one another (Sankar, 2009). Sara's identity was influenced by all the above-mentioned factors and therefore, it is proposed that she is a post-modernistic self.

A post-modernist self is further described as complex, multilayered, multiple, and not integrated. Gergen and other postmodernists have claimed that multiple selves are an adaptive response to a world of multiple demands. Through this lens, as cultural evolution carries human nature toward a more autoplasic, docile structure of personality, the idea of an integrated identity or personality appears to be an ideological holdover from an earlier historical era (Greenwald, 1982). Similarly, it is speculated that the idea of integrity or unity in personality, so central to classical theories of personality and psychotherapy, may appear to be a myth (Leary and Tangney, 2003).

Sara's identity is fractured and fragmented due to the voices around her that shoved her around. These voices belong to Omar, Panglima, Yun Ming and her father. The nature of how each of them affected her identity-shaping will be discussed.

Sara is young, beautiful and educated. She is a university lecturer but undergoes some changes due to the instability of her surroundings. She is married to Omar who was educated in Harvard and seems like an open-minded man. Although she is a married woman and her father is a religious teacher, she falls in love and has an affair with Yun Ming who is a Chinese civil servant at the Department of Unity. Islam believes a Muslim woman should behave in a gracious and soft manner, taking care of her husband and children and always remaining faithful to him. Hasan (2003:103) quotes from the Quran which states, "Shall I not inform you about the best treasure a man can have? It is a virtuous woman who pleases him when he looks at her, who obeys him when he commands her, and who guards herself when he is away from her. A Muslim woman has to be loyal to her husband, do what he asks her and guard her sexuality". Her affairs with Yun Ming are considered immoral, wrong and abhorrent as she is a Muslim woman.

Omar's behavior changed during the course of their marriage. At first when she met Omar in the States, he was a frivolous man; "the frivolity that had been an engaging part of his character had disappeared. In their first meeting, they had danced and his touch seemed like fire" (Fernando, 2004:39). Now, Sara thinks that their relationship had never progressed. She is confused and does not know what to do or how to talk when Omar is around. As it was mentioned earlier when he comes back from a tour, his behavior has changed and Sara is no longer able to communicate with him. "When he returned, he had become withdrawn, and spoke to her less. It was as if a blight had fallen" (40). What makes everything worse is when Omar calls Sara *sundal* (loose woman).

He asks her, "who is the man you've got?.....you've got someone, haven't you?" (50)

He even neglects Sara's presence which is considered an assault to her. "One day as she placed a tray of glasses of syrup for them on the low table...he continued talking without a flicker of recognition of her presence...she felt a vile sense of inferiority" (40). As a consequence, she leaves Omar and commits adultery with Yun Ming. Before moving further on, a short definition of *multiphrenia* is provided.

2.2.1 *Multiphrenia*

Multiphrenia refers to the many different voices in our culture that tell us who we are and what we are. It also refers to the various relationships we have in our lives that pull

us in different directions; the variety of roles we play so much so that the very concept of an authentic self with knowable characteristics recedes from view (Wade, 2001).

Sara is in a state of *multiphrenia*; on one side, there is Omar who not only expects her to do as he wants, but also abuses her sexually and physically. He also considers her inferior to him. She tries to remain stable by being faithful to her husband because he used to be a decent man. Her identity becomes fractured and unstable. As such, she plays various roles which make her lose her identity so much so, she is no longer a consistent and single person. As Wade (2003) asserted, in the postmodern world, you just do not get to be a single and consistent somebody. Sara used to be a typical married Muslim Malay but due to the different people who influence her life, she turns into a postmodern individual with multiple identities. Another person who greatly influenced her *self* is her father.

Lebai Hanifah was an Imam. Sara's relationship with her father was very strong and she has been influenced by him all her life. Sara's multiple identities are in a large part due to her father's role in her life. Her father had always loved her and cared about her. He taught her all the religious principles so that she can develop a good, moral character; 'She looked again the sweet tousled child I had loved. Allah forgive me, more than her brothers. It was on my knee that she learned to love numbers. From me she learned to speak Arabic [. . .] When she read Quran, all the fixtures of the material world failed and the crystal clear tone prevailed all over (105).

Before turning to a postmodernist self, she was a person with good religious background; Sara loved her father, adored and admired him, was proud of him and more importantly, the attachment between them was very strong. Sara even dreamed about him and was encouraged to go on with her relationship with Yun Ming. He had said to her in a dream '..... look after each other' (141). Her father is another voice in her life telling her what to do. He, in a way, encouraged her to free herself from Omar and live with the person she loves although this would make her an unfaithful wife to Omar.

Her father's death was a hard jolt for her as she always consulted him about everything and he would help her whenever necessary. She was no longer able to ask him for guidance. This fact is made known towards the end of the story when Omar saves her from Panglima's house. "I'm going to take her from here. You have brought disgrace to us all. I know she was greatly attached to her father. Now he's gone, she has strayed because she has lacked his guidance" (175/176). These voices (Lebai Hanafiah, Panglima, Yun Ming and Omar) around Sara shaped and created her identity.

Panglima who is a friend of Sara's father has been fond of her ever since she was a little child. He always gives advice to Sara's father on many matters, especially the ones related to Sara's life and education. He is always seeking a way to get close to her although he himself is married. He is a senior officer in the Department of Unity and therefore is considered a powerful man.

His disrespectful behavior with Sara puts her in a state of *multiphrenia*. When Sara goes to his house alone in the hope of being able to release Dahlan and Yun Ming, he makes her unconscious by drugging her and then raping her. He does not take the responsibility for raping her and instead shifts the blame onto Sara for his shameful act.

He accuses her of her sexual relationship with Yun Ming: "...you make yourself cheap with a *kafir*, why were you acting like this with me?" (167). Panglima calls Yun Ming *kafir* because he is a Chinese. Sara's vain attempt to remain stable and not let her identity be fractured and fragmented is foiled for the second time. She is *pulled into various directions* in the effort, but as she is faulted by Panglima for being raped, she changes to an unfaithful woman to both Omar and Panglima because they define her so by calling her *Sundal* (loose woman). She unconsciously bore the false belief that she is unfaithful but does not show any signs of regret. She recalls the first time Yung Ming and she were together which shows she unconsciously believes she is what Panglima calls her.

One of the concepts by which postmodernist characters are defined is a *Protean Self*. The *protean self* is capable of changing constantly in order to adapt to present circumstances (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Sara has changed into a *protean self* as a result of her affair with Yun Ming. She was taught well by her father as a child especially in religious matters, but after committing adultery with Yun Ming, she no longer cared much about Islam. A Malay Muslim woman would never ever think of having an affair, so Sara as a *protean self* changes her beliefs in order to be able to continue her relationship with Yun Ming. Her identity is now floating around without anything to anchor on to.

"Casting a glance sideways at the handsome white mosque across the lake, she was startled as she thought: I will not go back." (128). When she looks at the mosque, there are no signs of a true Muslim in her thoughts. Considering the mosque as a symbol of Islam, she has changed her religious belief as she is a *protean self*. She even changes her political beliefs. In the chaotic condition of the country after the May 1969 riots where the 3 different races could not live with each other and religious tolerance was zero, Sara (a Malay) falls in love with Yun Ming (a Chinese).

As Hermans & Hermans-Konopka (2010) explain, some may see change as reflecting one's true self while others may argue that there simply is no true self. Thus Sara's religious and political change is not a reflection of her true self but a lack of this self. This is evident when at the end of the novel, Yun Ming asks her to go to the Eastern Zone with her, but her attempts to stay away from him fails. "He was crowding her, just as Panglima did. Then he was saying something absurd about needing her "... ...I'm lonely. Come with me to the Eastern Zone..... You think if you insist on something for long enough you'll get it? She realized he was not listeningShe stood on the pedals of her bicycle to burst away, but he held it till she spun around and fell" (179). As was mentioned earlier, the four different voices (Panglima, Yun Ming, Omar and her father) in Sara's life changed her identity from that of a Muslim married woman to a multiple and fragmented postmodernist self without any centre.

3. CONCLUSION

In both of the texts, we can see that identity is fully influenced by other factors surrounding the person. Both characters battle for the stability of their *true* selves. Kim Li and Sara's identity were shaped and affected by outside forces or *others*. "Identity is created by outside forces" (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010: 93). As mentioned earlier, for Sara, these *others* are the four men in her life who shaped and created her

identity as they pleased. Postmodernists support the idea that self and identity are not reality but the result of definitions. The idea that there is a “real me” that is identifiable throughout life is abandoned (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

Sara’s self becomes fragmented, de-centered and fragile to the point where she loses her true self and her attempts to find mental stability fail. Kim Li, on the *other* hand does succeed in finding her true self at the end of the story when she murders her father. For Kim Li, the *other* is her polygamous and patriarchal father who is a symbol of the patriarchal society she lives in which encourages polygamy.

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