

A THEORY OF A DISTINCTION OF WORDS ROUGHLY ANSWERING TO SEX

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Introduction: Women in Theoretical Discourses and Practical Life

Now that several universities in developing countries have taken on women's studies programmes started in universities in Europe and the United States, it seems fated that they should also be taking on the paradigms that come with it. One of these paradigms is the statement that Women's Studies is out and Gender Studies is in, that we should be concerned with broader theoretical perspectives focusing on the interpersonal and intersexual dynamics of relationships between men and women and that it is only in the context of these dynamics that women's real problems can be understood. This chapter attempts to review changing theoretical perspectives in Women's Studies within the social sciences and argues that the processes of the engendering of knowledge need clearer definitions of meaning which can separate differences between "theoretical discourse" and "practical life". Theoretically, discourses on gender relations equally absorb male-female perspectives providing similar emphasis to emic definitions of male and female and encouraging a unitary rather than segmentary vision of human activity and sexual life. Yet in practical life, this holistic, integrative and unitary vision often breaks down in sexual, family and communal relations, necessitating analysis of critical and problematic areas of relationships between men and women. In this context, it is the "woman's position" rather than "gender" which is the issue; that component of the sociobiology and sexual ingredient of a human being which provokes essentialist ideas of women. This in turn influences male behaviour patterns upon women not excluding abuse and violence.

Paradigmatic Visions of Women in Western Social Sciences

The transference of concern from "women" to "gender" is part of an academic exercise of broadening the paradigms of feminism in Western Social Sciences. Many social scientists both women and men applaud this change as meaningful and necessary, stating that this will remove the stigma of subjective feminist dogma in mainstream sociological and anthropological theory, wiping the slate of social inquiry clean from its tainted past. But does the existing trend of discourses on women really help women? To what extent has intellectual activity on women particularly the Western critical theory of reflexivity help upgrade the status and position of women in society? The position of women academicians in academic culture has been improved through the main-streaming of gender in the theory of knowledge but has it contributed towards the improvement of street culture where misconceptions, prejudice, abuse and violence against women are rife? Current statements of social scientists on women are so firmly embedded in semiotics, pragmatics, cognitive psychology, sociobiology, history, psychoanalysis and metaphysics that what is now regarded as "mainstream" and "acceptable" is anything that does not undertake to analyse women as a single unit of observation in society. For anthropologists the formula is simple; take on theoretical constructs from outside anthropology, preferably those developed by European existentialists at the turn of the century, lace them with the ethnography of the Third World then relate them back to the First with the necessary universalism and relativisms, with a cautioned statement that the "other" is "similar" or "different" from "us", and ending it with a final hint at making a modest contribution to anthropological theory. That history, biology, psychology and psychoanalysis have in the past been accused of "ghettoizing" anthropology the way feminist theory is today is not of any relevance. What is relevant is the "state of the art" of the discipline and woe betide anyone who continues to use paradigms and approaches which are no longer in favour.

Malaysian Women and Interpretation through Feminist Theory

To return to the topic of the transference of the unit of observation from "'women" to "gender", it is obvious that there is some confusion and scepticism about this in Third World academes. I have made some observations about this and in the rest of the paper, offer some reasons why this general consumption of Western social theory modelled according to the intellectual dialectics of the moment has to be stopped at least till we know where we are going and what is it we find useful for ourselves.

Why should we stop for the moment? Firstly, over the last few decades, Malaysian social scientists educated in the United States and Europe found in feminist theory a useful perspective for understanding some of the problematic areas of changes affecting women in Malaysia. At this early phase, feminist theory was founded on the notion that sexual asymmetry was a basic condition of "man" and significant throughout history. In the social sciences, the writing of Gough; (1975), Rosaldo and Lamphere; (1974), Reiter; (1975), and Raphael (1975) confirmed Simone de Beauvoir's (1953) statements of women as a "second sex", asserting that since basic biological and sexual differences already existed between men and women, cultures only differ in the extent to which these differences become capitalised into social rules, formal or symbolic, to sort out hierarchical forms of relationship between men and women. The feminist-Marxist perspectives which were advanced by writers like Leacock; (1981) Lee; (1982) and Gough, (1982) further developed the idea that processes of change and transformation in society are accompanied by visible forms of social differentiation based in sex and biology. A perspective adopted from Morgan (1870), Engels (1884) and Marx (1975) on the emergence of rules of the sexual division of labour, usually advance the idea that patriarchal trends in social organisation, ordered by Western modes of capitalism and industrialisation have indeed emerged and encouraged women's devaluation in society.

In Malaysia, this phase in social theory saw a mushrooming of sociological studies of Malaysian women in industry. It also coincided with the development of research programmes on women in local

universities although this was initiated more by the availability of foreign funding for WID projects (Women in Development) rather than a new feminist consciousness in research. However as the research processes moved to critical areas of analysis of social change affecting rural women (Hutheasing; 1981, Lochhead; 1983, Karim; 1987a and b, 1989) and the application of participatory action research strategies (Karim; 1982) researchers unravelled emerging sexual differentiation in work patterns, productivity and land ownership. Gradually, a feminist consciousness emerged and became a powerful emotion of commitment for future research on women in development. In telepathic union every other woman social scientist in Malaysia began looking into similar WID issues.

Widespread industrialisation, rapid modernisation and ill-conceived development policies generated interest in and concern for women in traditional and modern sectors of work and employment (Hing, 1984; Oorijitham. S, 1987; Jamilah, 1986; Tan Boon Kean, 1987; Maznah Mohamad, 1987; C. Ng, 1987). The use of terminologies of "exploitation", "marginalisation", "invisibility", "missing", "devalued", "powerless", and "statusless", not only expressed the feminist mood of scholars but concern over serious deep-rooted misconceptions of women by administrators, planners, politicians and agents of development. Migrant Malay women were subject to work discrimination in factories while women of all ethnic communities were given job descriptions which defined women's work to be inferior to men and meriting lower wages and social benefits. Writers also argued that agricultural modernisation and rural development appeared to enhance gender differentiation (Kaur, 1986; Ng, 1987). Anthropologists, working on ethno-medicine, midwifery (Laderman, 1983; Karim, 1984) and local politics (Manderson, 1980; Karim, 1982, 1983), echoed the concern of sociologists that women could not effectively compete with men within the formal public bureaucracy of medicine, health and nutrition.

Research on women which contained similar ideological trends gradually became referred to as Women's Studies and concretised in teaching and research programmes in local universities. The earlier feminist perspective of sexual inequality as universal or developing

from relationships which were much more egalitarian continued to dominate writings. Consistent was the theme of economic history moving without a pause, from feudalism, colonisation to global capitalism. As these studies attempted to elucidate women's marginality within economic forces of transformation, disparities in class were given priority over ethnicity or culture.

More recently, the observation of differential responses to work and employment amongst women provoked much more rigorous cultural analysis in gender. Aih-wa Ong's (1987) study of spirit-possession as symbolic resistance to capitalistic modes of production within the parameters of factory work, showed Malay women's ability to reconsolidate their inferior position within the production line and to challenge male authority. She argued that "in the absence of a union, covert revolts sometimes developed into acts of retaliation against factory men, the intimate supervisors as well as tormentors of operators in daily life" (1987: 211). Malay women, more than the Chinese or Indians were inclined to express resistance through spirit-possession and this was explained in terms of the cultural constitution of Malay women to evoke particular psychological responses to work stress and gender hierarchy.

The reflexive method of drawing attention to the researcher's own personal and academic history vis-a-vis the subject of inquiry has had an important impact on processes of the gendering of knowledge. It has made social scientists more sensitive to their subject of inquiry as humans living and interacting with others within their own cultural fields and capable of generating their own intellectual and political discourses. (See Bell, 1993; Karim, 1993; Ganesh, 1993). For both European and non-European experts on women and gender, reflexive analysis served to widen differences between the priorities of research and action, academe and activism. As subjects of a data base, women had now to be observed as active agents of change. Constructs did not need to have built-in models of activism as in neo-Marxism, since these earlier approaches excluded possibilities of women and men constructing their own models of change and transformation. In the early women's studies feminist phase, scholarly research on women had to be combined with social action or at the very least policy

strategies for more effective decision-making. However, this new wave of thinking argued that women were capable of their own form of feminism and activism. In the Free Trade Industrial Zone of Malaysia, they are capable of screaming in massive union, along the assembly line (Ong, 1987), boycotting male dominated unions with passive silence or wearing veils overnight in defiant opposition to their previously widely publicised image of "the electronic bomb shell", *Minah Karan*. (Karim, 1992).

Across the assembly line into the rural countryside, the writer had observed mass hysteria.¹ Young nubile of the Muslim faith, through daily sightings of malevolent spirits came close to shutting down religious schools, challenging "Islamic" ideology that religion can combat pristine spiritualism. For these young Muslim girls struggling for some kind of self-identity under the newly emerging oppressive structures of Islamic fundamentalism, defiance, hostility and emotion adopted the images of animism and spiritualism which fundamentalists had earlier sought to wipe out of Malay folk culture. Animism ruled "okay" as century old metaphors of ghosts were converted from "feminine" to "masculine" forms with sightings of identifiable male flying objects in black robes and saffron beards. In a religious school in Langgar, Kedah, during a spate of mass hysteria in 1991, male authoritative figures were mocked as they jeered at the Head of State (*Menteri Besar*) and called him an ugly dark man. Male school teachers had their moments of trauma as they were chased out of the school building. The girl also painted crosses in the local mosque, swearing allegiance to Christianity in defiance of the *imam*. Based on such evidence, poststructuralists may now question feminist Marxists with mocking glee, "Can you organise 'mass hysteria'?", "Can you protest better than they can?" Given the constraints of their culture, "are you not convinced that only they know what to do and only they know the best way to do it in the short term?" Feminists will probably have to concede their defeat momentarily. No, they could not do all that, not for other "oppressed" women, not even for themselves. So they returned to the books and tried to rethink feminism through "gender" and eventually postmodernism.

Malaysian feminists, however continued to find feminism useful. The combination of ideology and action was very attractive and removed boundaries between "women researchers" and "women researched". In any case a post modernist construction of gender seems to imply that "women" no longer have problems which are absolute to women, that women's issues are no longer based in biology or sex and that innate differences between women and men need no longer be a basis for social theory. Critical questions come to mind; Do men rape gender? Are child bridegrooms for sale as much as child brides? Other than the characters in the "American Gladiators" are women now a new physical force to be reckoned with, displaying more "hunk" and "spunk" and violence against men? Are there more battered men than women? What was wrong with an ideology which expressed concern for the less advantaged, in terms of biology and class? After the rediscovery of culture in postmodern theory and the extension of the unit of observation to "male" can we now argue that men can make a claim at being culturally disadvantaged, because they have for centuries set the rules and rites of culture in the direction of patriarchy, male dominance and machismo? If the understanding of the female condition is better seen through the male condition and vice versa what more does it say about the "woman" other than that she is a product of the male "other"? The postmodernist and psychoanalytical conclusion about women reintroduces an old hackneyed version of sex which we have heard before. She is a male creation, unhappily moulded by this "other" in his counter image of himself and his mother, the manufacturer of breast milk which he was denied as a baby. Sometime ago her father in an attempt to understand the tensions between him and her brother, contributed to this "male-condition" by making her a victim of sexual fantasies. Very few Malaysian social scientists could identify with this brand of poststructuralist feminism which compromises the vibrant bodily vision of "woman" to "gender" - a subdued neuter defined as "a distinction of words roughly answering to sex" (Chambers: 1975).

In poststructuralism, it should be noted that the symbolic relational perspectives of "cultural" differences have been in anthropology for decades from the works of MacComack and Strathern (1980) who refuted the idea of patriarchy as a universal principle of ordering

relationships between men and women. The stronghold of the "Strathernists" has been in their handling of the interpretive mode of analysis whereby meanings of male and female, sex, sexuality, sexual power and its ideological link-up with political power, authority and dominance can be derived from the cultural fabric of indigenous life-experiences. However, not to be outdone, feminists turned not to this group but to the poststructuralists to refuel.

Since 1968, a group of thinkers, then loosely identified as "Poststructuralists" and now more firmly identified with the "Postmodern Project of the Mid-Eighties", challenged the comfortable assumptions of the West about basic social ideas of humanity, equality, nationality and progress. The original "poststructuralists" Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Francois Lyotard, questioned Western social theory through the reflexive mode and with it the Eurocentric experience of "Knowing it all" through scientific rationality, social conscientisation and human emancipation. Directly and indirectly, these writings inspired feminist writings in psychoanalytic theory, the two most quoted readers in the late nineteen eighties being Brennan's (1989), *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* and Chodorow's (1989) *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*. Psychoanalytic theory was used to advocate the importance of the "differences within" approach, or in the words of Spivak, "working out the heterogeneous production of sexed objects" (1989: 10). Since Derrida criticised "phallogentrism", the phenomenon of "becoming women" through male ideas of sexuality and womanhood and "anthropomorphism", where human knowledge and history are defined through the "anthropos" as "man", these feminists sought to do the same and in so describing how sexed objects are produced in different cultures and society, imposed yet another Eurocentric model of defining women with a new universalism based on a biased male psyche. From the original "poststructuralists", some moved to Lacan and his theory of signs.

Lacan's notion of language as "male" and psychical organisation that humans think through signs rather than real people (1982) spurred on writers to articulate this in the feminist consciousness, that a "common cogito" exists amongst women, which is described differently through

language but nevertheless surfaces in a fire of consciousness, that every "male" sign makes them more conscious of being "female". Braidotti (1989: 100) states that "the real life people" of the street articulate their feminist consciousness, in the following way, "I woman, think and therefore I say that I, woman am". Of the works associated with the "post-modern project" in feminist theory the most popular remains Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978). His essentialist argument of how women became embodiments of men, subjugated by male power in class and culture, culminating in their final oppression through industrialisation and modernity, has a familiar ring to it. Essentially, Foucault rejects Karl Marx's dialectics of the economic division of labour for he shows how something even more depraved can be produced from the European sexual division of labour which systematically continues to oppress women in modern society. Foucault does not believe that the conscientisation process can actually change these deep divisions between men and women since biology and sex will always be there, to be interpreted in different ways to the male advantage.

The switch from Marx to Foucault, as the ultimate feminist with the deepest sense of consciousness of social injustices centring around the female sex is problematic for Malaysian social scientists. Foucault was concerned for the deconstruction of Western social theory in the context of the history of Europe. One can assume he did not know much about the cultures of the developing world nor did he care since his ultimate concern was with his European experience. As feminists moved deeper into European postmodernist thinking and the psychoanalytic unconscious, their estrangement with feminists of the developing world will probably get worse not because postmodernist thinking fails to address male-female relations in Malaysia or the rest of the developing world but because deconstruction is essentially the rejection of one social theory for another, a change of menu in line with current trends of thinking that political systems should be democratised, that economies should be based on capitalist, free market systems, with no protective tariffs and so on. Freedom, equality, innovation and productivity are supposed to follow suit from political and economic systems which are being deconstructed. In the same vein, in deconstruction theory, a new burst of energy in

heterogeneous and qualitative thinking is supposed to emerge and generate a new intellectual consciousness, much more complex and vibrant than what the "grand recits" of the past had to offer to us all.

The Female Condition in Malaysia: Fluid Structures and the Problematic Logic of Infinity in Indigenous Cultural Construction

To what extent then has this new feminist consciousness brought forth a better understanding of the female condition in Malaysia? Can we learn more about ourselves through deconstruction and feminist psychoanalytic theory? Do we uphold the idea that Malaysian women are concerned for themselves as autonomous human beings, resisting phallocentrism, anthropomorphism, essentialism, machoism and authoritarianism? Can we bring forth this heterogeneity (Spivak, 1989) and self-consciousness (Braidotti, 1989: 100) and state; "We women, the movement of liberation of the I of each and every women, assert the following, 'I woman, think and therefore I say that I, woman am' ". In another paper (1991) I suggested that the ordinary run-of-the-mill woman is more inclined to say, "I the working mother who buys the bread and clothe my children, who casts my vote and warms the bed of my husband who sleeps in the bed of the other women, I have had it and would like a change". In her cry for change, she may not bring forth a feminist consciousness in herself but may project these personal confrontations onto political leaders, going along with the theory that her life circumstances would be improved if there was a change in political leadership. Hence in an East Coast State in Kelantan, Malaysia where 55% of the voters are women, votes have swung back again to the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), the ultimate bastion of Muslim male dominance where women are formally articulated as the "lesser sex" (Karim; 1992). Why should Muslim women forgo personal autonomy and constrain personal freedom in this way? Possibly because they do not clearly articulate the distinction between "personal" and "social", that is, they see themselves to be closely interlinked to other more visible, public institutions, like the family, community and the state, which in their list of priorities stand above personal freedom and autonomy. Hence "change" is perceived more in the context of "institutional-organisational" transformation rather than

the personal or psychological. Community and state consciousness then override personal freedom and if the choice is voting for fundamentalism, so be it.²

We can find other examples in Malaysian society to back this argument. If one observes the popular women politicians of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the Malay branch of the ruling party, Barisan Nasional, we can see how these women have cultivated very carefully, Lacanian notions of femininity and womanhood into their public image. They work their way into these images by hiring dress consultants and spending a fortune on weight-watching, the primary motive being to outsmart the other, comfortable with a sexuality defined by men. They fear the image of the "matriarch" and cultivate instead, the softer metaphors of "wife" and "sister".

If one moves to a different class of women within the same age group in the market place or the village neighbourhood, one finds a different kind of sexuality there; after moving through the "rites de passage" of phallocentrism and essentialism in the public and early years of marriage, these women gradually deconstruct sexual images of their early life, becoming more confident, aggressive, bawdy and at times even asexual in their posture and walk (Karim, 1991b). Men in turn, now out of their prime, "*sans* teeth, *sans* taste", lose the characteristics of masculinity of their earlier years³. Some make a last minute bid at their youth and virility by marrying again or having an affair but soon settle down to cultivate a more diminutive image of the male "other". Hence with age, there is a transference of sexual metaphors, with women becoming more "male" and men more "female".

The difference between market women and elite women politicians and professionals is that the former are moving around in a social system which is more bilateral and egalitarian where socialisation has earlier sorted out "male" - "female" metaphors in social life. The latter on the other hand are competing in an economic and political system which is more patriarchal and hierarchical. To gain acceptability, elite women deliberately work on male images about women and use it to their advantage. Hence the feminist psychoanalytical theory may not help

the Malaysian woman understand herself better because its built-in heterogeneity is theoretically infinite, in form and process. Once one adopts the perspective of heterogeneous differences, one realises that an equal number of heterogeneous characteristics divide women even within a particular culture (I have explained this through my observations of women in Malay culture) so how does one know where to draw the line? Psychoanalytic theory attempts to introduce universalisms through commonly shared experiences but it simultaneously draws attention to individuals outside this sphere of common shared experiences. Where do we draw the boundaries between different states and positions of relative or relational constructs? If it is supposed to draw one closer to the subjective truth, its concepts, theories and perspectives do not clearly sort out social realities which are cross-culturally comparative in terms of sex, class and ethnicity.

Secondly, psychoanalytic theory is an academic reaction to neo-Marxism which had become a powerful source of explanation from the nineteen seventies to the mid-eighties on the problems of women globally and in the developing world. It is essentially an exercise in self-criticism of European scholarship and Western social theory. It attempts to go into the deeper unconscious of the human condition, brings in the male in the empty spaces of knowledge generated by Marxist feminists and questions the European intellectual consciousness of knowing and its articulating of universals through European history (See Caplan; 1988). But by wishing to belong and to derive some kind of academic legitimacy from postmodernism feminists in the Social Sciences have become so reflexive that what they are now saying about themselves and about men and women are semiotic and psychoanalytic descriptions of themselves based in and derived from a European vocabulary of ideas originating from European culture and thought, translated mainly through the English language. These messages are not necessarily relevant to the female "other" in the developing world. Strathern has mentioned this before (1988) that cultural descriptions of the "other" expressed in the English language invariably borrows the assumptions of personhood and relationships contained in that language so that value-free systematic exercise of deconstruction may never really be possible.

Thirdly, the model of the autonomous woman, seeking personal recognition and a separate identity as a human being in a world where humankind may obliterate the engendered species that we are is another Eurocentric projection of the mind. I have briefly demonstrated how women may deliberately want to cultivate a female identity based in male metaphors of the female "other", in order to advance their position more forcefully in a male world⁴. It was also suggested that in personal life trajectories, these values may be cyclically adopted with women working their way out of this system of phallocentrism once they have acquired a different kind of status in middle and old age. In Malay society, age gives women more status than men who in the later years of their lives become marginalised from the ritual sphere of activities in Islam and *adat*. They get more passive as the women become more active. They devolve as women involve themselves in ceremonies of "rites de passage" in Qur'an reading and circumcision (*Sunat*), marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth. Women may also not place themselves above the family, community or the State and may think through the multiplicity of social roles they are accustomed to.

Fourthly, in this mad scramble to contribute to the deconstruction of Western social theory, a greater schism now exists between feminists of the first and developing world since the latter is now left on their own to discover their own indigenous heterogeneous existence whatever it means. This may not be such a bad thing if the timing and definition of this reflexivity is left for them to decide, but the preconstruction of a theoretical framework of reflexivity for the developing world may throw local priorities and concerns into confusion. It is almost like saying that scholars of the developing world should now be reflexive and develop some kind of critique about the application of Western social theory in their studies since leading Western social scientists are now doing it and the timing is right for them and should be so for the "other". This is certainly presumptuous if not insidious since scholars of the developing world generally adopt Western social theory through a reflexive mode of analysis, vis-a-vis colonial history and the current economic and political dominance of the Western "other" (Karim'; 1991b). Neo-

Marxist and dependency theory was relexive enough, tailor - fitted for the developing world with the position of "we" and the "other" reversed for local consumption.

Women, Heterogenous Knowledge and Perspectives of "Personal" and "Global" Society

If scholars of the developing world heterogenize experiences of economic history, they may be left with a lot more cultural residue than they can handle. It is important to link this heterogeneity of experience with more general universalistic perspectives of change and transformation taking place in the "global society". The engendering of local knowledge may be a particular product of the human history of endangered minorities and although the cultural meanings of "engendering" may differ, nevertheless, such changes occur through a "main-streaming" process of movement into the "global society". Let me demonstrate this with an example from the Ma' Betisé", an *Orang Asli* (aboriginal) group numbering approximately 3,000 living on the mangrove mudflats of Carey Island and the West coast of Selangor (Karim, 1981a and b). I had lived with them for three years between 1974 - 1978 and have continued my social and family ties ever since. Generally this community would have defined gender approximately the way I have. To articulate in gender terms culturally is as meaningless as the concept itself. To elaborate, sexual equality is a pervasive norm in Ma' Betisé culture not so much through a conscious effort to express equality between the sexes but as an unconscious system of recognising important differences in skills and aptitude between men and women and yet not allowing these differences to be a basis to form hierarchies in interpersonal, familial and economic relationships.

Proper marriages seemed to be such a vital institution to the Ma' Betisé, yet the amount of adultery that took place was rather startling. On an average, three couples get "caught" every year and pay fines to the Native Court (*mengge*). This includes the young and unmarried, the young and married, married elders and unmarried elders (widows and widowers). Many more have relationships which are abandoned

after a while when a husband or wife protests but does not wish to make a formal complaint to the village elders. According to elders, adultery was less prevalent before the system of "spouse exchange" was practised, whereby married couples exchanged spouses for an agreed period of time. This has become unacceptable to the younger generation. Elders complain that the young are more emotional now and tend to express their jealousy and insecurities openly. They believe that jealousy is a very negative emotion and the proper way to cope with an adulterous spouse, for example, is to seek another temporary partner so as to form checks and balances over emotions which might otherwise disrupt village life. The best system is when both spouses agree to exchange spouses with an understanding of its temporary nature or the dissolution of the new union at an agreed time.

Without questioning why the young feel more insecurities now than before, I was impressed by the way in which mature married women explained these matters to me. They were casual, frank and enjoyed discussing marriage and sex. I learned that while the harbouring of emotions was "bad", the release of these emotions was destructive (See Karim, 1993). The important thing is to introduce alternative relationships which could neutralise such emotions in the short-term. It was sound and practical advice. The fact that rules and advice were made equally for women and men gladdened me for it seemed that by contrast, in modern Asian society, women suffered more by harbouring emotions. Men seem more capable of releasing them by seeking redress through further sexual experiences.

The equality of defining emotions in men and women and the equality of dealing with them was something of a new experience for me. It was the ultimate in gender equality; emotion and emotive action were explained through experiential knowledge rather than sexuality and gender. However, although the Ma' Betisé were not a "gendered" field, the anthropologist in the long term learns to link ideas of morality in gender with social change and ecology (Karim; 1993a). An endangered community becomes engendered when women and children incur higher mortality and mortality rates as demographic imbalances occur and health standards decline. For cultures which are dependent

on the mangroves and rain-forests for survival, it seems that each new phase of development triggers off other social problems: the loss of women to outsiders (government technical assistants, rubber-tappers and farmers), higher morbidity rates among women and children from viral and epidemical diseases and infections and the pressure upon younger families to migrate into ethnically mixed areas which eventually cause them to lose their language and common identity. Since women are symbolically conceived as the transmitters of history and culture, the loss of women imply a history and a present with no future. Hence, fear over loss of women reinforces in a "genderless" society a concern for women as a precious "resource". Comparing this long-term concern for regenerating heritage and culture through women, with my own earlier experience of the Ma' Betisé as "genderless", I was forced to conclude in my own restudy of the Ma' Betisé that consciousness of differences between "male" and "female" within a people's cognitive universe shifts in accordance with critical phases of survival. The immediate concerns of balance between economy and ecology reduces consciousness of the importance of women while long term concerns enhances it. The Ma' Betisé have developed a sense of self-containment within an endangered environment but the continuous endangerment of life in the long term suggests the engendering of meanings of survival.

If one compares this to postmodern thinking, one sees writers like Fukuyama exploiting the demise of socialism and communism in terms of a people's reflexive interpretation of their own economic history, rejecting it from social and economic liberalism. In *"The End of History"* (1989) he evoked Hegel's provocative definition of history, of human consciousness finally becoming self-conscious, suggesting that the new wave of liberal democracy speaks for itself in putting the post-war movement of authoritarian communism to an end. Criticisms against his writing forced him to state in *"The Dialogue"* (1990: 13):

Will a future global cataclysm - either nuclear or environmental - wipe the slate clean, so to speak, and start the historical process over again? Or will we pick ourselves up from where we left

off and rebuild our democratic - egalitarian world as it was before the crash, continuing our current arguments over the rights of women and minorities? I simply pose these questions without hopes of answering them.

Intellectuals usually do not have answers to the questions they pose and even if they do, provide the kind of answers other intellectuals might want to hear, within an acceptable paradigm of thinking at a particular time. The Ma' Betisé, like the Yanomami, the Mohawk Indians and the Penans are not in the fortunate position of articulating their history through notions of completed cycles. Living at the critical edge of societies practising Fukuyama's liberalism, they have to interpret events according to the way others intrude upon their own history so that for them and other minority cultures in the First and Third World, history does not end but proceeds in an endless cycle of redefinition.

In providing the example of the Ma' Betisé, I was merely making the statement that whatever discourses we want to build for ourselves in feminism: universal-global, heterogeneous-indigenous, unitary-singular and so on, what one needs to understand is how to interconnect this emerging "world society", the evolution to global processes of change with "personal society", the indigenous institutions under which we live. An acceptable perspective for social scientists researching on women is to laterally build upon the "personal society" first and compare it with others which are similar and different, in structure and formation. The special features of "personal society" in culture, language and thought can be compared to the wider "global society" at the zenith above, to see if it can ever be so unique as not to experience a "*déjà vu*" position of being hurtled along with other "personal societies" in a similar direction and losing control of the direction and speed within which it is being hurtled. If one wants to walk out of the shackles of "top-down" theory construction and produce converse heterogeneous theories, one has yet to identify the dialectics of interaction of these two levels of construction of knowledge and

meaning before knowing where one's position is or how far one has climbed out of one's identifiable past into a common "future" with others in this "global society". Malaysian feminist discourses, are at the stage of rejecting "top-down" theory construction without knowing how to move on from there. Since our concern is with reconstruction, the way to go about it is to understand the extent to which we are still indigenous and heterogeneous in relation to world events and how much control we have over this. Men and women, ethnic groups, cultures and nations evolve differently through varying courses of history and interconnect at different phases of change and transformation, providing individuals within with different degrees of control and autonomy over personal and public life but a point is reached in this exercise of relativity when they need to declare their position in relation to the "global society" and this is where our reconstruction begins.

Notes

- ¹ Research on mass hysteria was conducted between 1990-1991 in several Islamic based secondary schools in Kedah, in particular Langgar about 12 kilometers from Alor Star in Kedah. Twelve girls who were struck with hysteria were interviewed a week after the incidents. Months later, many of them claimed they did not remember what happened and did not even remember being interviewed.
- ² Similar trends occur in Algeria, Bangladesh and Pakistan, where women with manifest consciousness, vote for a system which will reduce their personal autonomy but liberate them (so they perceive) from their miserable past of economic and social injustices.
- ³ See Karim (1993) for a detailed analysis of the advantage of Malay men vis-a-vis Islam. In *adat* rules of propriety and decorum encourage femininity in women, which is usually expressed in covert body language, dressing and mannerisms. Flirtatiousness is an expression of femininity in *adat* but moral

depravity in Islam.

- ⁴ In *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia* (1990), Errington argues that this phenomenon leads to the empowerment of women in Southeast Asian societies where social rules may be formally constructed to the advantage of men.

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