



**ALTERNATIVES TO FREEDOM:
EXPRESSIONS OF EMPOWERMENT IN THE MALAY FEMALE BODY**

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ABSTRACT

Discussions on sex and sexuality in Malaysia have increased in the last decade. The rhetoric used in urban, liberal, and typically English-speaking spheres implies that conversations about sex are taboo and stigmatised, as well as suggests that there is a need for women to reclaim their bodies. However, this contradicts what is being observed in the supposedly conservative, Malay-language spheres. Not only is sexual (and at times, pornographic) content ubiquitous, but it is also not always stigmatised. At the same time, these do not position women as subordinate or passive bodies. This dissertation explores that contradiction, with a focus on the Malay woman's body as it manifests in the three registers of Lacanian psychoanalysis – the Imaginary, The Symbolic, and the Real. It analyses women-produced live-streamed pornography on the Internet, pornographic marketing of traditional penis medications on social media, and confessions of supernatural disturbances to show that: 1) Malay women continue to sustain their historically established cultural power and 2) that despite restrictions on their bodies, Malay/sian women have other strategies to assert their authority. Ultimately, what this dissertation argues is that concepts of gender that are hegemonic in Western society are not always applicable in the Malay context. Thus, there is a need for other theories beyond feminism to examine gender and how it relates to power in Malaysia, as well as Southeast Asia.

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This dissertation was meant to be a distraction from my grief over Jacob's death, but it turned into a year-long obsession with sex and the supernatural that is likely to persist beyond this degree. I am admittedly, a dilettante and thus, began this project with the same casual spirit. The only reason I managed to sustain my efforts this far is because of the immense support I received from my supervisors, friends, and family.

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INTRODUCTION

My goal for this project is to develop a better understanding of the contradictions taking place in Malaysian sexual discourse on the Internet. Content from the more English-speaking, urban liberal spheres of online media – such as on Twitter and Instagram – function based on the understanding that conversations about sex are taboo and stigmatised in Malaysia (Low, 2021). In the last few years, there has been an increase in “sex positive” Southeast Asian social media influencers, many of whom focus on women’s sexual experiences (Bruce, 2020). These provide much needed information on erogenous zones and sexually-transmitted infections but also, include validating statements about loving one’s body and letting go of shame (see @jasexplains, n.d.).¹ These advocates who focus on body positivity and female pleasure tend to be more frequently featured in English-language media (Bruce, 2020; Low, 2021; Nawawi, 2022), which adds further strength to the claims that Malay Muslim culture in Malaysia is sexually repressive.

However, the ubiquity of educational and entertaining sexual content in supposedly conservative Malay language online media – where creators include working class women, doctors and religious leaders – indicates that sex (and conversations about sex) is not as stigmatised as liberals might think.² In fact, the Malay sex discourse landscape displays a broad recognition of women’s bodies and desires (see @puterikasim, n.d.). It is common to see TikTok videos in which women talk about wanting someone else’s husband (nadosanan,

¹ Jasmine King’s profile description on her Instagram channel @jasexplains says that she talks about “all things sex & shame from the Southeast Asian POV”, which signals an assumption that sex and shame go hand-in-hand (@jasexplains, n.d.).

² What is also interesting is that in the last decade, HIV infections due to sexual transmission (especially among men who have sex with men) has increased compared to before, when HIV infections were typically transmitted through needle sharing among drug addicts (Chong et al., 2021).

2020) or even draw attention to issues such as painful intercourse (Lisa Ismail 87, 2021). This openness towards sexual topics is not an effect of Westernisation, as is sometimes (incorrectly) believed (Musa, 2021). Mohamad (2021) and Musa (2021) have both written about pre-20th century Malay sex manuals, which spoke about sex beyond its reproductive purpose and contained references to both male and female pleasure.

While female pleasure is certainly recognised in Malay sex discourse, this is not to say that there are no controls on women's bodies in Malay/sia. There certainly are. Modernity has led to increased regulation of the Malay woman's body and her role in society (Hochel, 2013; Ong, 1995; Stivens, 2019). However, Malay/sian women are able to employ a range of strategies to navigate these regulations without necessarily seeking emancipation from them. Thus, this dissertation proposes a mode of female empowerment that does not seek recourse to liberal precepts. In order to show this, I explored sex and gendered media across a range of Internet platforms including blogs, social media, and video platforms, to look at how the female body is deployed. The goal here, is to present a less orientalist view of Malay Muslim culture that has often been labeled repressed or oppressed (Hochel, 2013; Muhamad et al., 2021; Musa, 2021). This introduction further explains the background, structure, scope, and implications of my study.

Background

In Malaysia, discourse on women and their issues tends to take two slants. On one hand, there are those that can be labelled feminist projects (Halley, 2008). These frame resistance to the patriarchy as feminism (Ariffin, 1999; Lee, 2018; Mohamad et al., 2006; Selamat & Endut, 2020). On the other hand, there is a rich tradition of scholarship that questions that idea. While these recognise that the dominant structure in Malaysia is patriarchal, they also argue that this dominance is unstable and that women's historical

cultural authority is sustained despite modernisation (Khoo, 2006; Ong, 1995; Peletz, 1995, 2002; Rahmat, 2020; Stivens, 1998). This dissertation expands on the latter with a focus on the female body in the digital age.

Influences of modernity in Malaysia – from the West and Islam – may seem oppositional but they are similar in that they are driven by capitalism (Ong & Peletz, 1995), science and/or reason (Friedman, 2015), as well as rigid gender expectations (Stivens, 2019). Rather than counter these rigid gender expectations with demands for fluidity or gender-neutral language, Malay women who lean in to their biological difference – their embodiment as women – can gain more opportunities for empowerment (Karim, 2021). Wazir Jahan Karim (2021) writes that the predominant indigenous view of female empowerment in Malay society opposes mainstream Western feminist theory that “advocates gender equality as a necessary universal in modern society” (p. 105). Rather than advocating for gender equality, *adat* and Islam uphold gender complementarity. Karim (2021) argues that this complementarity “renders women their own sphere of influence and dominance, which can be as empowering as the public and political roles granted to men” (p. 105). Historically, Southeast Asian women have had more economic and social freedom compared to women in other parts of Asia (Booth, 2016). This is applicable in Malaysia as well; although Malay men hold authoritative positions in official structures such as religion, government and the state, Malay women continue to hold informal cultural authority (Andaya, 2006; Ong & Peletz, 1995).³ This is because they continue to maintain economic autonomy in areas such as farming, manufacturing, services and social enterprise and are typically the breadwinners in the family (Karim, 2021). This autonomy and authority are more pronounced on Internet

³ In a music video that went viral during the Raya (Aidilfitri or Eid al-Fitr) season in Malaysia in 2022, a local entrepreneur, Datuk Seri Aliff Syukri Kamarzaman and his wife sing a song about whose hometown to return to for celebration festivities. In the song, Aliff complains about how their argument is making his head spin. Her response is: “If you had just listened to me, our lives would be a lot more peaceful.” (Rusa Music, 2022)

media, where the greater variety of representation means that layperson voices can also be heard (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

Despite modernity's rigid expectations of gender, being woman in Malaysia does not necessarily mean being the "weaker sex" (Karim, 2021). This dissertation explores Malaysian local gender dynamics through virtual ethnography across a range of Internet platforms, focusing specifically on sex media and gendered content. Research on pornography and sex media has been particularly useful as a starting point for studying contemporary society and how sexuality and gender, as well as policy and regulation, play a role in it (Attwood, 2017). Besides examining pleasure and desire, exploring sex media also allows an inquiry into power dynamics within a particular context (Williams, 2004). What the examples of sex and gendered media in this dissertation will reveal is that women in Malaysia are not positioned as subordinate even in a supposedly male-dominated modernity, and that even in situations where they are constrained by hegemonic ideologies, they have alternative strategies to reassert agency. This indicates a more complex, hybrid type of modernity taking place in Malaysia that allows for a different notion of female empowerment. Besides a lack of male dominance, we shall also see in my project that reason and science – which have been positioned as masculine (Peletz, 1995) – are able to coexist with magic and mysticism.

This dissertation focuses on Internet sources because in this digital age, the online world is reflective of the dynamic taking place offline (Ess & Consalvo, 2011). While this is true of most media, Internet media is distinct in that it is embedded in everyday life – i.e., there is less separation between public and private lives – to the point that the online/offline duality is no longer as clear-cut (Ess, 2011). Users of the Internet are no longer disembodied but make up a digital body politic that can be analysed. While there are studies on the gender dynamic of Malaysian social media, many of these focus on topics of usage or audience effects e.g., how LGBT communities use social media as a safe medium for communication

or to promote resilience (Juaini et al., 2017; Muhammad Ali & Mothar, 2020), gender differences in the use of hashtags or styles of influencer marketing (Lokithasan et al., 2019; Ye et al., 2018), how social media affects female self-esteem (Audrey et al., 2020) and effectiveness of social media campaigning for female political candidates (Isnin, 2018). What my study is more concerned with is the content and what it signifies in a broader cultural context.

Scope and structure

This dissertation takes a broad Lacanian psychoanalytic approach and thus, each of its respective chapters explain the body in its Imaginary, Symbolic and Real manifestations. These are the three registers or orders of the human subject in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The Imaginary is the ideal image that one develops upon entry into the Symbolic, the sphere that concerns itself with language and communication i.e., what society dictates. The Real is the point at which language breaks down and there is a lack in signification. Chapter 1 focuses on the Imaginary in that it explores how women use the Malay Muslim ideal of the female body – veiled and modest – for seduction and to assert subjectivity. Chapter 2 looks at the Symbolic link between the penis and the phallus, ultimately showing that in the Malay context, the penis and thus, phallic authority does not belong solely to men. Chapter 3 examines the abjectness of the Real body and how its manifestation as *gangguan* (supernatural disturbances) allows women to express their unique bodily experiences and desires.

Chapter 1 shows that despite the regulation of women's bodies, Malay women are still able to express their sexuality and assert their own erotic imagery without defying religious or social prohibitions. Hence, they produce pornography without transgression. The chapter begins with an overview of sexual content available on public online platforms including

Bigo Live, blogs and magazines, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. This shows a broader picture of sex media production in Malaysia, as well as how it defies the common understanding of conservativeness and sexual agency in Southeast Asia. Asians are often stereotyped as sexually conservative, and Asian women are often thought of as quiet and submissive (Ganesan et al., 2020). However, the available sexual content challenges these notions. Not only is sex media ubiquitous, it is also not perceived as illicit and is openly available, frequently going uncensored, on multiple platforms. On top of that, it often inverts the male-subject, female-object dynamic with much of the content produced by women or featuring women as dominant. This chapter also looks at the gender dynamic that takes place in a very particular form of sexual live streaming on the social platform, Bigo Live. In a lot of this content, women are positioned as dominant; they make demands (sometimes monetary), explicitly state what they enjoy in sex, and tease men without obligation to provide satisfaction afterwards. More remarkably, they do this while complying with religious and cultural requirements; they maintain a modest dress code, cover their hair and uphold a proper image of Malay femininity. The key takeaway here is that despite having to uphold an ideal Malay-Islamic image of what a woman should be, they are able to use this Imaginary to their advantage.

Chapter 2 builds on this to show that female desire is at the centre of the Malay sexual experience. While normative sex – as defined by the four-phase medical model developed by Masters & Johnson (1966) – typically involves ejaculation and male satisfaction, the marketing of Malay penis medications indicate a different dynamic. Although these medications serve to enhance the penis, the purpose of this enhanced penis is female satisfaction. This chapter applies Lacan's theory of the phallus to examine Malay gender authority in the marketing of penis-enhancing traditional remedies on Instagram. Even though the penis is not the phallus – which is a symbol of authority – the two are closely linked

(Ruti, 2018). At the same time, there is no phallic equivalent for the female sexual organ. This means that there is a level of authority accorded to the possessor of the masculine sexual organ. However, what Chapter 2 shows is that in the heteronormative Malay context, even the man's penis does not solely belong to him; it is shared with the woman (supposedly his wife, but this may not always be the case) and its main purpose is female pleasure. Thus we see that despite attempts by Islam to contain women's sexuality by enforcing the covering of her body, the Malay woman is able to make use of that prohibition for seduction and does not have to defy it to express her sexuality. Furthermore, even state efforts to restrict women to roles within the family (Stivens, 2006) – where the main purpose for her sexuality may be child birth and rearing – cannot suppress the focus on female pleasure.

While the first two chapters show that the Malay woman wields significant cultural authority, Chapter 3 deals with how women are still able to assert their desires even in situations where they do not have control, especially in relation to their abject bodies. This chapter argues that they do this through *gangguan* – literally meaning “disturbances,” said to be caused by supernatural beings, which result in issues such as inexplicable and excessive emotions, as well as body pains. This final chapter, turns to gendered content in the form of public Internet confessions, many of which are written by women and contain narratives about abjection. It applies Kristeva's theory of the abject to analyse these confessions of distinct female experiences (menstruation, pregnancy) and forms of corporeality that are typically excluded from the Symbolic. This excessive femininity that does not conform to dominant sociocultural structures is thus seen as monstrous. In the Malay context, this monstrousness manifests in the form of *gangguan*, which are afflictions attributed to supernatural creatures (literally monsters) such as ghosts (*hantu*) and *jin*. Women who experience *gangguan* seek treatment at traditional healing centres. This treatment involves communicating with the monsters, in order to understand why they are causing the *gangguan*

and how they can be appeased. Thus, women have the signifiers to confront their Real bodies – what lies outside the Symbolic and cannot be captured by language – while acknowledging that it lies beyond the rational and cannot be fully explained.

Theoretical framework

This thesis avoids labelling the examples of female empowerment here as feminism, not because it is viewed as a Western import (Lee, 2018). If that were the case, using psychoanalytic theories would be problematic as well. Like feminism, psychoanalysis originates from the West. In addition, it has also been criticised as heterocentric, as well as for its connivance with male biopower and phallic norms (Evzonas, 2020). However, psychoanalysis itself is influenced by its “historical situatedness and institutionalisation” and even Freud himself (1926, as cited in Evzonas, 2020) has stated that the study of the unconscious is “perpetually open to revision” (p. 573). Philosophers such as Judith Butler (2011), Julia Kristeva (Kristeva, 1980) and Juliet Mitchell (2000) have used psychoanalytic theories to analyse or in conjunction with feminist theories. Their theories in turn, have been used in feminist scholarship. Thus, this shows that there are possibilities for reconceptualising psychoanalytical theories for application in the Malay/sian context, which has been less explored compared to feminism.

On top of that, the examples of empowerment in this thesis do not conform to mainstream liberal feminist theory that has been imported by local Malaysian urban liberal feminists (Karim, 2021). None of the women or case studies I surveyed, even where they are most consciously challenging authority, used the term at any point. They do not press for emancipation from the dominant order, nor do they take any form of unified political movement. While it could be labelled as indigenous feminism, labelling it as such does not

produce any significant meaning, also because the term “indigenous” actually refers to the *orang asli* (usually translated as “aborigines”) who are Malaysia’s actual natives (Nah, 2003).

CHAPTER 1

UPHOLDING THE IDEAL: HOW MALAY WOMEN USE PROHIBITIONS TO PRODUCE PORN IN PUBLIC

Porn studies pioneer Linda Williams (2004) wrote about the need to study pornography as a cultural form, especially in relation to how “once-obscene matters” are now available in the public sphere. Smith and Attwood (2014), in the inaugural issue of the *Porn Studies* journal, called for a more critical approach to porn rather than the anti-/pro-porn stances that have been more common thus far. They write that critical porn research should “contextualise pornographies in relation to other media genres, forms and aesthetics, in relation to a variety of producer and consumer groups and communities, and in relation to the broader frameworks of cultural regulation and value” (C. Smith & Attwood, 2014, p. 11). My initial foray into Malaysian pornography does all of the above, while exploring the unique forms of sex media available in the context of Malaysian digital media.

In this chapter, I turn to a range of Internet platforms including YouTube, TikTok, and Bigo Live to show the prevalence of Malaysian pornographic content in the public sphere. The content on Bigo Live, in particular, is unique in its use of prohibition for seduction, as well as its veiled and implicit expression of sexuality, that completely escapes legal, social, and cultural censure despite its public presence. While understandings of pornography are subjective across cultures, the commonality is that there is something objectionable about it (Jenkins, 1998; Williams, 2004). Thus, earlier scholarship on pornography has positioned it as transgressive, requiring regulation, or as a rebellion against oppression (Attwood, 2004; Dworkin, 1979; Kendrick, 1987; Kipnis, 1993). However, Williams (2004) has influenced more critical studies of pornography, and this study

contributes to her call by showing how adhering to prohibitions becomes a strategy for Malay women to use the Imaginary to get away with producing sex very publicly in an environment that is largely regarded as Islamic and oppressive.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Imaginary emerges during the mirror stage – in the first six months of life – and it is during this time when the subject begins to associate her name and other labels with the image in the mirror (Morris, 2020). These labels, which may contain adjectives like “good girl”, “pretty girl”, etc. creates “an image that never quite corresponds fully to a real” (p. 12-13). Thus, representations of and desires for the idealised feminine image is often associated with heteropatriarchal control and/or oppression – an adherence to a disciplinary male gaze (Austin, 2014; Burke, 2006; Choo, 2008; Ferguson et al., 2021). At a glance, the pornography produced by Malay women seems to adhere to this gaze as well. Their bodies and the way they represent themselves comply with what an ideal Malay woman should be. However, rather than being controlled or oppressed, they use this ideal to tease their viewers. Unlike some forms of teasing in mainstream pornography, however, there is no resolution to the build-up. The mostly Malay and Muslim women producing it are not simply passive objects, subjected to a male gaze (Attwood, 2004; Mulvey, 1989; Paasonen, 2016) and instead, demonstrate that prohibition can be a means of power. In other words, the social confines in which this pornography operates is also what enables its existence. This is what makes the Malay pornographic use of prohibition for seduction different from the striptease – the striptease arouses because it is transgressive (Schweitzer, 2000), Malay porn on Bigo Live arouses without transgressing boundaries; there is no nudity or indeed, any skin showing and they even wear head coverings, thus preserving their modesty. This is all the more compelling because Malaysia is an Islamic country where pornography is illegal and sexual content is censored in the media (Rao, 2013).

This chapter explores how Malay/sian women are able to produce a very particular type of porn without defying religions and social prohibitions. Instead, these regulations paradoxically enable the public proliferation of this form of Malay/sian pornography. In order to show the significance of this, we will review relevant Malaysian laws and examine the incongruence between the strict legal system and the wide social acceptance of sex and pornography. This is especially obvious in the vernacular media produced in Kelantan, where the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) has ruled for over seven consecutive terms (*PAS Keeps Kelantan for Seventh Term*, 2018). Next, this chapter will turn to two case studies on Bigo Live, a streaming platform that has found significant popularity in the Asian region, especially in Southeast Asia. Of particular focus is how Malay Muslim women use Islamic symbols⁴ – typically seen as repressive – to increase the effects of their seduction, while complying with Malaysian and Bigo Live’s legal requirements.

Williams (2004) writes that whether mainstream or margin, pornography is “emphatically part of American culture” and that porn criticism must recognise this (p. 2). Thus, although this chapter chiefly examines Malay/sian pornography, it will begin with a brief look at discourses on pornography in Western media, with a major focus on the perception of sex and porn as transgressive in North America.

The transgressive nature of North American sex media

The proliferation of pornography has grown alongside the development of new communication technologies (Susca, 2017). In a digital age, this diversity has grown exponentially (Ashton et al., 2019). Like in Malaysia, there is a diverse variety of sex media

⁴ Article 160 of the Malaysian constitution defines Malay as a person who professes the religion of Islam, speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay customs (*Malaysia: Federal Constitution*, 1957). Thus, while there are Muslims in Malaysia who may not be Malay, all Malays are assumed to be Muslim.

and pornography available in the West. Moreover, perceptions towards and acceptance of the sexually explicit can vary across countries, regions, and individuals (Ashton et al., 2019). Exploring every single one of these in a single chapter would be impossible. Thus, this section shall focus on the transgressive nature of sex media and pornography as presented by some of the dominant voices in the field of porn studies, many of which have pointed to a mainstreaming of porn (Attwood, 2009; Paasonen, 2016; Williams, 2004). Kinks, fetishes and non-heteronormative performances are now seen as acceptable forms of pornography – so acceptable that they may no longer possess any shock factor. This mainstreaming of pornography has led to the development of porn culture (Attwood, 2007; Paasonen et al., 2007; Susca, 2017). As an example, consider the difference in reception between the indie film *Secretary* (2002) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015). When *Secretary* was released, BDSM was viewed as a kink and its protagonists – a lawyer and his secretary – were seen as perverse (Gorfinkel, 2015). But when the first movie in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy was released in 2015, it was accompanied by a range of official merchandise that included sex toys, wine and even a teddy bear (*EL James*, n.d.), as well as an even wider range of unofficial merchandise that included baby clothes, water tumblers and makeup (Van Iderstine, 2015). The series of books that the movies were based is said to have brought BDSM into the mainstream (Green, 2015).

Despite this mainstreaming, and although sex in pop culture is abundant to the point of mundanity, “speaking sex” is still viewed as transgressive and contrary to social norms or what is considered proper (Williams, 2004, p. 2). This view of sex as transgressive is at odds with the idea that Western culture is more open to sex and has a higher level of sexual literacy (Attwood, 2009). In fact, the North American perspective – as presented in the popular journalistic analyses *Pornified* (Paul, 2005) and *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (Levy, 2005) – implies that there is something harmful about sex when it is openly available for

public consumption (Paasonen, 2016). If we look again at the movie *Fifty Shades of Grey*, we see that much of its popularity was due to its transgressive nature. More pertinently, its popularity was considered controversial because it raised widespread media alarm about the ways women consume sexuality (Dymock, 2013). Even when pornography and sexualisation of culture are correlated with increased freedom and gender equality, this liberation still stems from transgression (McNair, 2002, 2013; Paasonen, 2016). This reinforces the idea that there are cultural and social restrictions in place that pornography has to transgress when made public.

Williams (2004) calls this “tension between the speakable and unspeakable” on/scenity (p. 4) – where the obscene is brought into the public sphere. On the other hand, this tension is less distinct in Malay/sian pornography, because as we shall observe in the upcoming sections, it does not transgress boundaries. In order to fully appreciate the public proliferation of Malay/sian pornography, the next section will outline some of the laws relevant to sex and pornography in Malaysia.

Pornography laws in Malaysia

In Malaysia, where there is a Malay majority, mass media has not been pornified and sex scenes are censored in film and television (Rao, 2013). Although there is no clear definition of pornography listed in the relevant laws, law enforcers and media censors generally consider most forms of sexual representations illegal / unfit for public consumption. In the relevant sections of the Penal Code (2018) and Film Censorship Act 2002 (2006), the type of content in question is simply described as “obscene” or “against public decency” (Film Censorship Act, 2006, pt. III; Penal Code, 2018, pp. 165–167). The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content (MCMC) Code also prohibits “explicit sex acts” in media content as part of its code of conduct (The Malaysian Communications and

Multimedia Content Code, 2004, p. 13). According to the Penal Code (2018), anyone found guilty of selling, distributing, or owning pornographic content could be imprisoned for up to three years and/or fined. The jail time increases to up to five years if a person sells or distributes to anyone below the age of 20 (Penal Code, 2018). Under the Film Censorship Act (2006), anyone who releases a film that is considered obscene is liable to a fine between RM10,000 to RM50,000 and/or a prison term of five years or less.

However, one loophole in these laws is that consuming porn on the internet is not technically a crime.⁵ This means that it is technically legal for Malaysian viewers to view pornography online, as long as they do not download the content onto their devices. If the content that Malaysian pornography creators produce are not technically obscene, they are also staying within the boundaries of the law. This puts Malaysian pornography in an interesting situation. While there are countries, such as the United States (Weitzer, 2020), United Kingdom (Thurman & Obster, 2021) and Australia (Stardust, 2014), in which pornography is regulated but not illegal, porn is still relegated to private spaces and its trespassing of this spatial boundary is often met with objection (Attwood, 2004; Schelling, 2020; Williams, 2004). Williams (2004) also recognised the controversy of screening pornography – even if it was for research. In contrast, pornography is illegal in Malaysia but the crossing over of pornography from private to public space is not met with the same furore. Even when the law is actually broken, the public tends to be less outraged.

For example, when Malaysian sex bloggers Alvin Tan and Vivian Lee shared their sex videos online, the public was merely amused. However, what caused rage was a photo of the couple on Facebook that they posted during the Ramadan fasting period in 2013. The

⁵ The law I am referring to is Section 292(a) of the Penal Code, where the most relevant line pertaining to pornography consumption disallows having porn “in your possession”. So while Malaysians may not be allowed to sell, distribute, import, export or own pornography, the law does not say anything about consuming porn on online channels (Penal Code, 2018).

photo showed them eating pork bone broth (*bak kut teh*) and had the greeting “Selamat Berbuka Puasa” (happy breaking of fast). This led to a charge under Section 298A of the Penal Code, as well as under the Sedition Act, “for causing religious disharmony”. Their earlier videos from 2012 were also used to charge them under the Film Censorship Act (Boo, 2014). Therefore, it was not their pornography or sexual behaviour that led to prosecution but rather, their seditious disrespect for Muslim customs. In this case, their sex-related charges were used to extend their punishment. This leads to another key implication underlying our discussion: anti-religious sentiments are more likely to be punished by law compared to pornography, despite the latter being more ubiquitous. Sex-related legal charges are used as an excuse to “punish” someone for other acts and is not really an effect of societal outrage. While sex scandals may affect public opinion and subsequently cause the end of political careers in the United States (Masket, 2014), Malaysian politicians’ careers do not end even if they are charged and imprisoned. While their careers may be put on hold, this is due to the legal implications rather than public opinion. Former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has been charged twice for separate occasions of sodomy and was imprisoned for a total of almost 10 years (Kumar, 2019). Even so, he continues to be active in politics and has ardent supporters (*Anwar Ibrahim: A Long-Held Dream to Lead Malaysia*, 2020). When Azmin Ali, who is currently Senior Minister for Finance and Economics, Minister of International Trade and Industry, was implicated in a series of sex videos that were shared through Whatsapp group chats, he did not face any legal charges or experience much public backlash (KiniTV, 2019; The Star, 2020). He went on to become one of four senior ministers, a position established by current prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin to replace the deputy prime minister position (Mat Ruzki & Sulaiman, 2020). While Azmin’s lack of legal punishment may have been due to his political connections, what is also notable is that there was no public outrage.

Even before his categorical denial that those videos were of him, public emotion towards those leaked clips ranged from amusement to indifference.

What this seems to imply is that although the laws related to sex and pornography are relatively strict in Malaysia, there is still room to push its boundaries. However, this does not mean that all pornography is freely available on all platforms in Malaysia. As part of their efforts to maintain their code of conduct, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) has blocked many popular porn websites (C. Lim, 2018). Even so, Malaysians have managed to circumvent these blocks, especially because the Malaysian government's efforts "revealed a great deal of ignorance of how the internet works" (Abbott, 2001, p. 105). For example, when the Malaysian government banned access to the digital publishing platform, Medium, Malaysians changed their default DNS servers in order to access the platform from their computers (Pikri, 2016). Every time new blocks are put up, a quick Google search often reveals new methods to bypass those blocks (Amy, 2014). Some of these methods could be as simple as using a VPN or changing one's Internet Service Provider (ISP) (*Why Malaysian so High in PrawnHub?*, 2020). So Malaysians do have access to websites with more mainstream representations of pornography such as Pornhub, xHamster, XNXX and pornogramxxx; and the Malaysian content available on these platforms would be a rich source for cultural analysis.⁶ There are also other forms of more controversial pornographic content like child pornography, revenge porn, and peeping porn videos shot with hidden cameras (All Women's Action Society, 2020) that require further scholarship. However, this chapter shall focus on sexual representations that are readily

⁶ E.g., A Google search with the keywords "Malay makeik" (Malay aunty) turns up mostly pornographic search results. Clicking through reveals collections of low-res videos of Malay women – some wearing veils – performing sex. Malay porn is often referred to with the code word "3GP" because of the low video quality.

available in the public sphere, which do not face significant social disapproval or government censorship.

Malaysian sex media in the public sphere

In order to show the pervasiveness of publicly available Malaysian sex media, we shall consider vernacular media produced in Kelantan. Not all the media are produced by women but Kelantan makes for a useful example especially given the fact that the state has been ruled by the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) for over seven consecutive terms. After it took power in 1990, the State Legislature of Kelantan ratified the Hudud Bill in November 1993 (*PAS Keeps Kelantan for Seventh Term*, 2018). Although hudud cannot be implemented until the Federal Government changes the Constitution, state leadership has said that Muslims in Kelantan who did not agree to the laws would be considered apostate (Rajanthiran, 2015). Hudud is part of the Shariah law, which is an Islamic legal system derived from the Quran, Sunnah and Hadith. Under the Hudud law, anyone who commits pre-marital sex (*zina*) will be punished – stoned to death for a married person (stones have to be of medium size) and 100 lashes of the whip plus one year of imprisonment for an unmarried person. In order to be convicted, there has to be four eye-witnesses who must be adult male Muslims of “just character” (Rajanthiran, 2015, p. 79). If an unmarried woman is found to be pregnant, or delivers her child while unmarried, that is also evidence of *zina*. While the laws look strict in nature, implementation and enforcement are tricky. Even more so because it is apparently “not a key issue for the ordinary Kelantanese” (Abdullah Sani, 2015). So while there seems to be a greater amount of restrictions – both from a legal and religious perspective – one look at Kelantanese media shows that the local attitude toward sex is not as conservative as one might believe. Vernacular Kelantanese media is replete with sexual content but even when it makes use of explicit language, it escapes platform censorship because it is produced in

colloquial Bahasa Malaysia (BM). In fact, much of it is available openly on tube sites like YouTube, as well as on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok and, prior to its adult content ban, Tumblr.

An example of this is the music video for the song *Tubik Masuk* by Adik Wani, several versions of which are available on YouTube (KRMediaNetwork, 2013). Although the song is about “how delicious smoking is”, anyone who understands the Kelantan dialect that the singer uses will know that the lyrics are referencing sex (Awanama, 2012). The title of the song itself is a reference to sex – in English, *tubik masuk* means “out in”. The chorus lyrics are especially explicit, with sex sound effects and lyrics, which when directly translated mean “out in, in again, ah ah, out again”. Although the singer is fully dressed – long sleeves, long pants – she gyrates and moves her hips to the music throughout the video. At one point, she even gyrates around a thick pillar.

Figure 1: Screenshot from a music video of the song *Tubik Masuk* on YouTube



This video that has about 218K views at time of writing shows the singer dancing around a thick pillar. While the average thickness of the phallic pole in pole dancing is a mere 45mm, this pillar

*seems to be 4-5X the length of her palm. With the trees in the background, it is obvious that she is also performing her dance in public which is something that the average pole dancer does not do.*⁷

Another Kelantanese media producer, Alieff Irfan caused controversy nationwide when he produced a short film called *Cikgu Suraya*, which many netizens referred to as “soft porn” (Khalizan & Al Qayum, 2019). *Cikgu Suraya* (Teacher Suraya) is the name of a character in a popular blog from the 90s in which a young, beautiful teacher seduces a secondary school student (Fredley, 2014). Even today, the name still has sexual connotations. Although Alieff’s version of the story does not actually feature any sex, it does include a scene in which the protagonist – a high school student – watches his teacher undress in the shower (Drama Movie, 2019). Not all the content on Alieff’s Youtube channel contains explicit sex, but many of the titles are sex-related. His channel includes titles that could almost be porn video titles or titles of erotic novels. These include “*Nafsu Pengantin Baru*” (Newlyweds’ Passion), “*Janda Muda*” (Young Divorcee / Widow), and “*Cinta Bini Orang*” (Loving Someone’s Wife) (Irfan, n.d.).

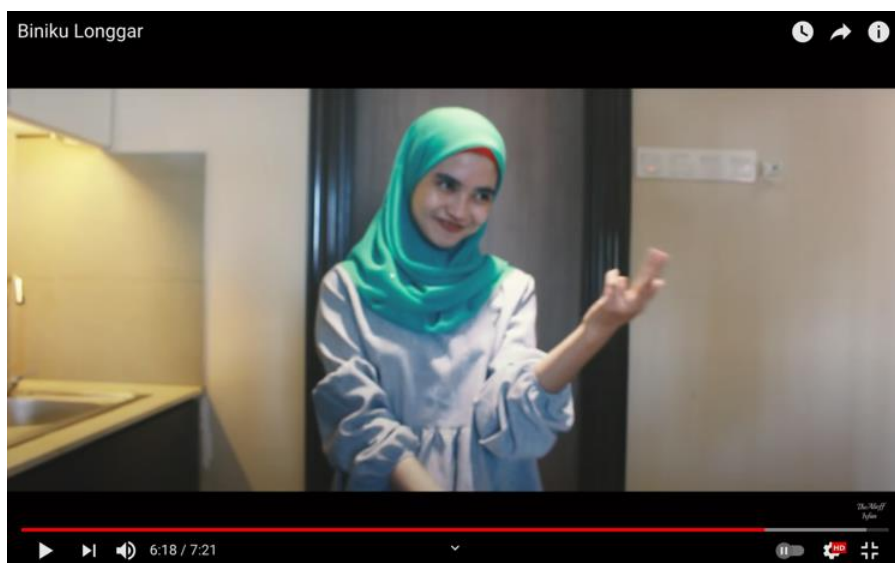
One of the videos – *Biniku Longgar* (My Wife is Loose) (2017) – makes a reference to the tightness of the female character’s vagina (Irfan, 2017). In the video, which is a piece of sponsored content for traditional medication (a brand named *Jamu Ngosek*) to increase vaginal tightness, a husband fights with his wife because their sexual relations are not satisfying. A friend recommends the medication to the husband, who asks his wife to take it.

⁷ Although pole classes for fitness are growing in popularity, it is still “trivialised and sexualised” (Holland, 2010, p. 43). More sexualised activities like striptease and burlesque are still considered subcultures and/or kept within private spheres. The level of female empowerment within these activities also tend to be decided based on class or income e.g., the singer and actress Elvira who also performs burlesque is more empowered because she makes more money vs strippers in strip clubs (Holland, 2010).

There is a time jump in the video – a few days later – and it shows the wife seductively asking her husband to follow her into the bedroom (see Figure 2). The sultry notes of the song *Careless Whisper* plays in the background as he follows her in. After they come out, they have satisfied faces and the husband says that one round is not enough. He pulls her back into the bedroom again (Irfan, 2017).

The presence of these videos show that Islam does not affect its practitioners the way liberal critiques seem to indicate. In fact, *Biniku Longgar* (2017) did not cause the same kind of controversy that *Cikgu Suraya* (2019) did, even though the former actually contains sex while the latter was merely sexy. Although *Biniku Longgar* did not display the actual sex act, the demands for sex are very explicit and initiated by both man and woman. We continue to see this in other Malay-produced media as well, in which sexual content is often not presented directly and instead disguised as content with moral and religious values. Although liberals might not see this as explicit on the same level as current mainstream pornography, its use of religion and morality is how Malaysian sex media is able to get away with depicting sex very gratuitously in the public sphere.

Figure 2: Screenshot from a short film *Biniku Longgar* on YouTube



While urban liberal Malaysians are discoursing feminism, sex positivity, sexual harassment and censorship on platforms like Twitter,⁸ non-urban, conservative Malay/sians seem to be having a different experience of sex and sexuality. Islam is generally seen as detrimental to women's rights, with gender-biased discrimination and oppression (Othman, 2006), but this is not what we are seeing. On TikTok, searching with keywords like *janda* (previously married woman i.e., widow or divorcee) is a good way to find videos of women describing their favourite sexual positions or listing their preferences for what they enjoy their partner doing. Browsing the “algorithm-driven ‘For You’” feed on TikTok also reveals locally made videos – from migrant or non-urban Malay Muslim women – that use explicit language to make references to how much sex they are having or penis preferences (Lisa Ismail 87, 2021). While some videos are not as explicit, the women still make their desire for a man obvious.

On one account @janda_kb, where the kb might stand for Kota Bharu, the capital city of Kelantan, a woman openly states in her videos that she is looking for a new man (@janda_kb, n.d.). Although she only has 21 videos (as of Feb 11, 2021), she has amassed 65.9K followers and some of her videos are viewed in the six-figure numbers. In one of her videos, the caption states “*jujur... awkbgtgok rupa sy atau body sy #hidupjanda* 🤔” (be honest, are you looking at my face or my body). The comment sections has responses from other TikTok users who comment on her appearance, ask her to send them personal messages or to show her face (@janda_kb, 2021). In her profile bio, she states “*sedang cari bakal iman*

⁸ In a viral Twitter thread from 2021, user @tashny shared a story about how an ex-fling “violated her conditional consent” by not disclosing his “relations with anyone else”. She claimed that his non-disclosure had resulted in her contracting a sexually transmitted infection (@tashny, 2021a) and in a separate Twitter post referred to him as her “abuser” (@tashny, 2021b). This thread led to a myriad Twitter responses on sexual abuse, harassment and rape. While these are serious issues that do deserve attention, the responses indicate how complicated sex has become in the liberal sphere.

ku” (looking for my faith). Although *iman* means faith, it might also be referring to “*imam*”, an Islamic leader (usually a man). Thus we can see a lack of separation between religiosity and sexual desire. Affairs are also viewed with a hint of humour. In one of these TikTok videos, a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf (which typically indicates a level of religiosity) lip syncs to the song *Ingat Kamu* (thinking of you) by TSG MR AL in a video with a text overlay that says “SUAMI ORANG is da best” (someone else’s husband is the best) (nadosanan, 2020). Based on the content on TikTok, some created by men as well, the *janda* is also seen as more sexually attractive and difficult to “tame” in the bedroom. There are multiple videos under the hashtag #hidupjanda that include overlay text along the lines of “yakin tak sama janda” (are you confident enough for a *janda*?). In one of these videos, a woman who is veiled and fully-covered includes several clips of herself posing seductively for the camera. In the final clip, she sits beside a man who quietly stares away from the camera, while she stares directly at the camera, reaches over to him and squeezes his thigh (@mat_tab, 2020).

Through these examples, we see that in spite of perceived repression, sex can still be talked about and even exhibited very openly. While these videos may not be produced specifically for arousal, the pornographic live streams that Malay women produce on Bigo Live are. Yet, these are still openly available and passes legal, as well as religious requirements. Before we analyse the live streams on Bigo Live, I will first provide a brief overview of the Singaporean-based social live-streaming platform.

Overview of Bigo Live

Bigo Live is a product / application by BIGO Technology, a company based in Singapore that creates video-based products and services with the assistance of artificial intelligence technology. Bigo Live is one of these products. The application is, according to

the BIGO company website, “a “global live video social platform where users stream to show their life moments, showcase their talents, interact and send virtual gifts in real time,⁹ and enjoy fun live sessions with people worldwide”. The app is currently available in more than 150 countries (*Bigo | About Us*, n.d.).

While YouTube may still be the most popular video sharing platform and there may be a range of other platforms for live streaming like Twitch or Facebook Live, peripheral apps like Afreeca TV and Bigo Live have still been able to find a loyal user base (Oh & Choi, 2017). This isn’t surprising considering that live streaming is growing in popularity and is expected to achieve a global revenue of US\$60 billion by 2026 (Hsu et al., 2020). An app that Bigo Live is frequently compared to is Twitch, one of the more mainstream live stream platforms. However, even though there are many video genres on Twitch, from sports to music and food & drink (*Twitch | About*, n.d.), it is most well-known as a platform for live-streaming games. Bigo Live audiences however, expect a much wider range of content and activities when they log on to the application (*Why Bigo Live Is the Number One Live-Streaming Application to Know*, 2021). Worldwide, Bigo Live has over 400 million users, with 29.4 million in Malaysia (Nathan, 2020). Other countries where Bigo Live is popular include Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. In India, where there are more than 22 million active monthly users, the users are concentrated within Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, which are usually considered less metropolitan (Mehta, 2019; Pacha, 2020). This seems to be the case in Malaysia as well. Compared to Twitch, on which most of the videos of titles in the English language, Bigo Live videos accessible from Malaysia are typically in Chinese or the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu / BM).

⁹ Users purchase virtual diamonds on the Bigo Live app with money. These diamonds can be used to send virtual gifts to any streamer during their live streams. Streamers exchange these gifts for beans, which can then be converted into actual money and cashed out. Due to how the purchasing of gifts and items work on the app, Bigo Live allegedly takes 54% of streamers’ revenues (Senapaty, 2018).

Bigo Live also has a social element to it. Besides watching live streams, users are also able to send personal messages to each other. This enables the audience to not just become fans of but also friends with the streamer. And although there are many hosts who have singing, gaming, dancing or other commentary-type shows, Bigo Live also enables its users to create content in collaboration with other users (*Why Bigo Live Is the Number One Live-Streaming Application to Know*, 2021). Streamers can compete in joint live streams or have discussions in multi-user group video chats. What Bigo Live has however, that most live stream platforms lack, is sexual content (Dzafri, 2020).

On Bigo Live, there are women who use the application to produce live-streamed videos that are meant to arouse their audience.¹⁰ These videos can be identified through their titles, which have sexual connotations e.g., “*buaya masuk*” or make use of emojis like the Sweat Droplets emoji (💧). The first literally means “crocodile in” but “*buaya*” is a word that is colloquially used to mean “womaniser”. The Sweat Droplets emoji is typically used in sexual contexts with a variety of meanings including orgasm, semen, and female ejaculate (Hsieh & Smothers, 2020; Thomson et al., 2018).

Once a person follows more of these accounts, the applications’s algorithm starts recommending more of the same. Although Bigo Live has regulations regarding pornographic content, these streamers have been able to circumvent them, mostly by eschewing nudity. There are live streamers who use Bigo Live to do peep shows – where viewers ask hosts to do things like show off their underwear colour in the comments and the host does it in exchange for gifts. There are also those who live stream their showers e.g., they are in the shower but only their feet can be seen (Dzafri, 2020) or they dance with sexy

¹⁰ Bigo Live videos disappear after the live streams are over and it can be difficult to find specific broadcasters on Bigo Live as many of them use similar display names and/or are constantly changing their handles. The only way to keep track of a specific host is by following them on the app.

clothing that becomes more translucent during the shower (Bigo HD, 2019). These overtly sexy videos are common and may be more similar to the mainstream sexual content on other platforms.

However, just as common on Bigo Live, are live streams that feature fully-clothed Malay Muslim women who wear long sleeves, long pants and even a veil or *tudung* (headscarf).¹¹ This is significant because the *tudung* represents conformity to cultural and religious requirements to dress modestly. Covering arms and most of the body is also a part of covering *aurat* (what is considered private), which is a religious demand. However, in this scenario, the women use their covered bodies to evoke sex. In these videos, which are compliant with both Bigo Live's regulations and Malaysian legal requirements, the women dance or talk to the audience who tends to leave comments that are pornographic in nature. The comments can range from things like “3 jam rsa sy jilat” – the direct translation of which is “three hours feel my licking”, a reference to oral sex – or “bawah basah abg kasi adik abg” (if you're wet down there I'll give you my little brother).¹²

While this might seem like harassment, the women do not seem to see it that way. A stranger commenting through a screen may seem like a reason to panic for some, but for the Malay women who produce pornography on Bigo Live, it does not seem like an issue of

¹¹ The *tudung* is often translated into English as veil but it does not always cover the face. In Malaysia, it is typically a headscarf that covers a woman's hair. Wearing a veil or headscarf is not mandatory in Malaysia, except for Kelantan (Othman, 2006). While there are familial and societal pressures that Muslim women face with respect to wearing *tudung*, “the common view in Southeast Asia is that the act of covering has to be freely taken for it to be an authentic act of piety” (Hochel, 2013). Veils may be seen as oppressive in parts of the world, but in Malaysia the *tudung* is considered fashionable (Hochel, 2013).

¹² Due to the nature of the application – only live videos show up in the home feed – it was not possible to count all the women who are doing this on Bigo Live. However, from my initial browse through the home feed with a focus on video titles containing text and/or emojis with sexual connotations, I was able to follow at least 10-15 women who were producing this sort of videos. I had hoped to speak to the women in order to find out more about their usage of the platform and their activities outside of it, but was unable to do so. This could potentially be an avenue for further exploration.

importance. Instead, they respond to the comments with straight-faced answers or even requests for gifts. If they do not like a particular comment, they simply kick the user in question out of their broadcast. The women do not react to these comments as if they are sexual harassment or threats of rape. This is not to say that sexual harassment or assault are trivial issues. Rather, it speaks to the power and authority of these Malay women, who seem to take for granted that they have the final say over what takes place on the broadcast and by extension, on their bodies.

The women remain fully-covered throughout their performance, not even taking their veils off in spite of pleas for them to do so.¹³ So on top of being compliant to Bigo Live's platform regulations, these women have also complied with legal and Muslim religious requirements. They have fully preserved their *aurat* (modesty). In this way, the women toy with both legal, societal and religious boundaries, staying within the lines while leveraging them to their advantage. In fact, the women's compliance to regulations serves to increase the seductive qualities of their live shows, while allowing them to exist in the public sphere without being transgressive.

This form of pornography produced by Malay women is possible due to gender dynamics in the region. We have seen how sexual content is persistent especially in online public spaces in Malaysia in spite of its religious conservatism and legal strictness. In order to fully appreciate the social significance of pornographic performances on Bigo Live, we will need to also consider the broader context on gender in Malay society.

¹³ What is also interesting in the case of these particular Bigo Live videos is that the men do not gain any direct satisfaction from the pornography that they are consuming. The women are not reduced into "object" or "passive bodies" who are offering themselves up on a platter for instant consumption (Attwood, 2004).

Conservatism and gender in Malaysia

Malaysia is a country where religion plays a major role in its people's self-identity (Regan, 1976), as well as informs the law (Ong & Peletz, 1995). While censorship is often more likely in cases of anti-government content rather than sexual content, there is still an emphasis on maintaining religious, cultural and moral values (Rao, 2013). In spite of this, or perhaps even *because* of this, sexual content has been given room to thrive, displaying a resistance to modern definitions of sexuality.

It is important to note that Malaysian modernity should not simply be equated to newness or Westernisation (Khoo, 2006). While capitalism is certainly a trait of Western modernity, Malaysia's modernity is also influenced by the Middle East (Ong, 1995). Thus, we must take into account resurgent Islam, which Khoo (2006) argues is also a consequence of Malaysian modernity. Both scenarios have resulted in an increase in heteropatriarchal influence, compared to the non-Islamic parts of local culture – *adat* – which is patriarchal but more bilateral in terms of gender (Ong, 1995). It was also more tolerant and open to “sensual and sexual matters” (Khoo, 2006, p. 5). Where Western capitalist culture has resulted in the use of the female “porn body” (Attwood, 2004, p. 11), Islamic resurgence has increased repression (Ong, 1995). In both cases, women's bodies are being regulated. Ong (1995) writes that “this struggle of capitalist state versus Islamic *umma* (social and religious community) has been an intensification of gender inequality in Malay society” (p. 272). However, Malay women, especially those in the middle class, “have found new ways of belonging in a changing Malaysia”.

This is pertinent because prior to modernisation, what made Southeast Asia distinct from the East and South Asian regions was the relatively high status of women, specifically, Malay women (Hirschman, 2016). These women in 16th and 17th century Southeast Asia had more autonomy and economic importance compared to women in any other part of the world

(Reid, 2014). This did not mean a that there was a complete absence of patriarchy, but rather that women played visible and public roles, especially in the area of commerce (Hirschman, 2016). During this pre-colonial period, some women went on to become “large scale traders” who “engaged directly in negotiations with European merchants” (p. 35). This was a very different gender dynamic compared to what was taking place in other regions during the same time-frame.

However, this is not to say that men and women were completely equal. Instead, they were active and had authority in different spheres of living (Hirschman, 2016). While men “retained authority in statecraft and in formal aspects of religion”, women took charge in other “spiritual matters, ancestor cults and as spirit mediums” (p. 35). Women were also in charge of the household, as well as commerce, compared to men who generally did work that involved metals and large animals. Due to this “historically established cultural power” of Malay women (Rahmat, 2020, p. 12), their “high status” has managed to persist into the mid-20th century in Peninsular Malaysia, especially in less urban communities. This, combined with modernisation and the influences that it has exerted, has resulted in an “uneven gender regime” because while Malay women are “contending with the masculinisation of modernity”, they are doing so from their “relevant historical power” (Rahmat, 2020, pp. 12–15). Malay modernity is thus, not securely masculine or patriarchal.

The role of women in society is one of the main contentions between Western and Islamic modernity. In order to make sense of modernity, Malay men have to contend with “Malay women’s cultural significance” (Rahmat, 2020, p. 15). This has resulted in a focus on issues of “women’s modesty, chastity and sexuality”, where women “have been deployed as bearers of correct religious dress and behaviour” (Stivens, 1998, p. 113). Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in women wearing tudung with women from different classes ascribing different meanings to their decision to veil (Stivens, 1998). The tudung has been

seen as a “neonationalist symbol of a specifically Malay modernity”, a “symbol of Islamic modernity”, or even a “means to escape some of the pervasive sexualisations of modernity” that are seen as coming from Western influences (Stivens, 1998, p. 114).

There are contrasting views on gender and sexuality in Muslim Southeast Asia. Modern Western-produced tropes and stereotypes indicate that there is no “pluralism with respect to gender or sexuality”, that “Muslim men are invariably given to patriarchal excesses” and that these “dynamics are sanctioned” by Islam (Peletz, 2011, p. 660). This orientalist mindset results in the general opinion that, as a result of tradition or racial culture, “Muslims are inherently conservative” when it comes to gender and sexuality (p. 660). However, Western literature on Muslims from the Middle Ages through the Victorian era focused on “religiously sanctioned lust, decadence and perversion” (Peletz, 2011, pp. 659–660). It presented examples of older men being “inspired by the beauty of pre-pubescent boys and beardless young men” and suggested that there was an attitude of “anything goes”, especially among higher class men. Both however, do not paint an accurate picture of what is actually happening in Muslim Southeast Asia.

There is, in fact, “entrenched traditions of pluralism” when it comes to gender and sexuality in Southeast Asia (Peletz, 2011, p. 662). The higher social status of women in this region – compared to women in the West, as well as South Asia and East Asia – allowed for “considerable fluidity and permeability in gender roles” (p. 663). While the West was experiencing “an age of repression” during which “modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex” (Foucault, 1976, p. 17), there was a very different attitude toward sex in Southeast Asia. Women were not expected to be virgins at marriage and Islamic doctrine encouraged both genders to ensure their spouses’ sexual satisfaction. In fact, it saw sexual desire as a natural part of life as designed by Allah (Kugle, 2003; Peletz, 2011). Western media typically portrays Islam as a religion that represses sexuality, but in its

mystical or Sufi forms, it is actually considered a sex-positive world religion (Kugle, 2003). This attitude toward sexuality prevailed during the early modern period in Southeast Asia and is still prevalent in peripheral and working-class communities (Peletz, 2011).

Although working class women were – and probably still are – aware of their “mistreatment as human beings” within capitalist structures, this consciousness was “partial and discontinuous” and did not culminate in any “coherent articulation of exploitation in class or feminist terms” (Ong, 1987, p. 196). Their response to “intolerable demands” was to cry, slow down their pace of work, become careless or lose their temper (p. 203). Some would cite “female problems” and attend to these problems in the locker room, while others would “adjourn to the prayer room”. However, these were also spaces where they were “seized upon by vengeful spirits”. Ong saw these as forms of resistance against “agencies of power and capital” which sees human beings as “raw resources, disposable instruments and fractured sensibilities” (p. 221).

These forms of resistance are not overt and often ambiguous in nature. They should not be construed as any form of political activity and “become identifiable only when understood” in the context in which it is taking place (Healey, 1999, p. 50). Although there are limits to a woman’s “means of resistance”, its subtlety is what gives it strength and power (p. 58). Healey (1999) argues that individual expressions and experiences of power and resistance need to be related to the intersection of class, gender, and other sources of structural domination” (p. 59). Resistance can only take place where power is applied (Foucault, 1976, p. 95) and during the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia, the focus of power was on restricting “women’s sexuality and bodily processes” (Peletz, 1995, p. 110). At the same time, modern capitalism and young women working in factories in Free Trade Zones also led to conversations about their alleged sexual promiscuity. In a country where power is still being negotiated on multiple fronts, there are more “possibilities for resistance” (Healey,

1999, p. 50). Often, women borrow the dominant order's "tools of power" to express their resistance. That way, their resistance makes use of "acceptable and respectable behaviour and practices" (p. 59). This is what we see happening in the Malay/sian pornography produced and distributed on Bigo Live.

Live-streamed pornography on Bigo Live

While some broadcasters are a bit more free and open in their programming in that they have no fixed format, there are others who have the same premise and visual setup in each live stream they air. Although the footage itself is generally low quality (in terms of video quality i.e., low resolution, sometimes with choppy connections), there is a sense that the broadcast has been produced i.e., the woman knows the effect that she wants to produce through her live stream. One such broadcaster went by the display name Baby, which she gave herself and indicates a level of self-infantilisation. She releases live broadcasts at least twice a day, always after she has taken a shower. Her videos usually have titles like "jom aumm 𐄂" (colloquial for "come eat") or "sayang i tak 𐄂" (do you love me), and always follow the same format: an extreme close-up where only her head and the top of her shoulders are visible.

In these live streams, she has just finished her shower and has a light pink towel wrapped around her head. She looks completely bare-faced i.e., not wearing makeup but her lips are always a vibrant shade of seemingly natural pink. She often looks like she is not wearing anything except for the towel, which like a tudung, completely covers her hair. She only shows half her face, so it would not be possible to identify her on the street but based on what is seen, she is conventionally attractive. Her streams, which last about 20 minutes, consist of her saying hello and thank you to her viewers in a childlike and pouty voice

(*manja*). Her signature part sigh, part moan type of voice shows that although her videos might look raw and authentic, they are “produced” and have the intention to arouse.

Figure 3: Screenshot of Bigo Live streamer Baby during one of her streams



In all her videos, Baby maintains the ideal image of what a “good Malay girl” should be – *malu* (shy) and *lemah-lembut* (“pliant in nature and body”) (Ong, 1987, p. 87). In a culture where “authority structures” are “built upon age and gender hierarchies”, pubescent girls are seen as needing protection and requiring the “the moral custody of father, brother, and other male kin” (Ong, 1987, p. 88). In other words, they are infantilised. Stuart Hall saw the infantilisation of the black man as a symbolic castration (Hall, 1997), which Dagbovie-Mullins (2013) extrapolated to black women as a symbolic lobotomisation, “stripping them of agency and autonomy” (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013, p. 749). However, we do not see this same dynamic happening with Baby. She not only maintains agency throughout her

broadcast, she also uses her infantilisation as a way to exert her authority over the audience. Although she adheres to conventions throughout her broadcast – she is the gentle and quiet young girl that is meant to be – she is not powerless or in need of protection. Instead, these conventions are what adds to the pornographic qualities of her broadcast.

In one of these videos, she asked for a specific gift (called KING D'ayu) from viewers who were asking for her number. In that same pouty voice, she asks them to send the gift, then send her a personal message with proof. After repeating these instructions several times, she eventually says “Don’t tell me I have to teach you everything” in a mock tantrum. One viewer responds in the comment section that “if everything needs to be taught, how can they find ‘the hole’”, a reference to sex and how a man is supposed to be the one leading the act. In this case, the audience sees Baby as the passive female that needs an active male for intercourse. However, this is an image that they themselves have created based on Baby’s produced performance. In her live shows, she uses cultural and religious gender limitations to increase the seductive qualities of her performance. In order to obtain any kind of sexual satisfaction, the viewers have to use the elements of the performance to create their own narrative. Meanwhile, Baby is using her cuteness or coyness as a way to tease her viewers and gain platform currency (called beans on Bigo Live), which she can later convert into actual money.

This infantilisation is also a common occurrence in mainstream pornography (Christina, 2011). It is so common that the category/genre has a name – barely legal: think porn actresses in pigtails and school uniforms designed to look underage.¹⁴ The image of the

¹⁴ The Japanese schoolgirl has also been a feature in Japanese pornography, but the image of the virginal and vulnerable, yet sexual and vulgar schoolgirl does not evoke infantilisation. There are two main audiences for the Japanese schoolgirl – adult men and young girls (Sugawa-Shimada, 2019). Even though the schoolgirl is sexualised, even for mainstream audiences outside of pornography, she is often displayed as powerful (e.g., the superhero-like soldier Sailor Moon). The schoolgirl in the Japanese context is more a symbol of post-war modernisation (Kinsella, 2002), which again is different from female infantilisation in the Malay context.

prepubescent female body, which does not bleed or expand uncontrollably, is contained and thus, an ideal (Ussher, 2006). Baby uses this ideal to control her audience and does not even provide a complete media product that audiences can simply passively consume. Viewers have to do the work in order to achieve their desired result. Throughout Baby's broadcasts, viewers participate by leaving comments in real-time. These comments include descriptions of her appearance – "*comelnya merajuk*" (you are cute when you sulk) – as well as sex acts that they want to do with her or for her to perform on them. Some even make requests for her to do specific actions during her broadcast. In one of these broadcasts, a viewer commented "*cuba ckp o sambil gigit bibir bawa*" (talk while biting your bottom lip). Although Baby is being objectified and instructed to do specific actions, as women typically are in most forms of pornography, she is not "indiscriminately available to men for sexual consumption" (Wright & Tokunaga, 2016, p. 957). In fact, she often does not perform what is being requested. Instead, she tells the audience what to do and continuously thanks them for it. She maintains control over the entire broadcast and has even removed or muted viewers during her shows.

While Baby's broadcasts may seem more produced, there are other broadcasters who have a wider variety of formats. Ashiera, who also goes by the handle Hufflepuff, airs her shows at random times during the day and often, after midnight as well. Some of her videos are conversational – she sits close-up to the camera and talks to her viewers or answers questions that they leave in the chat. She is always dressed modestly – long-sleeves, long pants – and she is also veiled. Although her clothing is not particularly tight-fitting, she is very well-endowed and even though she does not show any cleavage, viewers post comments on her breasts. In one of her profile posts, someone even comments, "*bsar la susu*".¹⁵ When

¹⁵ Other words they might have used for breasts include the crasser *tetek* and *nenen*, or the more proper *buah dada* (literally, "chest fruit").

directly translated, it means “big milk”, which is a very literal translation but what is interesting is that there is no separation between motherhood and sexuality.

This again, relates to the Imaginary where the mother is another “product of the masculine fantasy” (Morris, 2020, p. 23). When she is portrayed sexually in mainstream media/pornography, she is often referred to a MILF (“Mother I’d Like/Love to Fuck”). She is positioned as a passive object that is desired, but has no desire of her own. The other sexualised representation of older women is the “cougar”, who displays excessive desire but is not associated with motherhood. This “madonna-whore dichotomy” – where women are seen as “good, chaste, and pure madonnas” or “bad, promiscuous, and seductive whores” – still has an effect on how women are perceived (Kahalon et al., 2019, p. 348). While this dichotomy is present in Malaysia too, especially among urban liberals, it is not as pervasive in other levels of Malay society.¹⁶ In fact, Muslim Malays see women as having more *nafsu* or passion and they have been known to “still want more even after their husbands have achieved orgasm” (Peletz, 1995, p. 94). Like Baby, Ashiera creates performances using the idealised image of the mother as a way to seduce, but she is not merely a passive object of desire.

She does not wear clothing that might be viewed as sexual. In fact, in one of her videos, she wore black sweat pants and a long-sleeved black shirt with a repeating Bart Simpson print. However, Ashiera uses other methods to indicate the sexual nature of her broadcasts. Although she always is fully-covered, her broadcast notifications are pornographic. Some examples include “Hisap batang abg 🍆” and “Sini adik lancapkan 🍆”, with the former referring to felatio and the latter to hand jobs. In her conversational live streams, she steers her conversations to topics with sexual undertones. During one of these

¹⁶ It is common to see TikTok accounts owned by Malay women in which their calls for hook-ups and/or marriage alternate with other videos about their daily lives and children.

broadcasts, she spoke about the kind of men she likes, listing out must-have traits and requirements. When a viewer asks if she likes large penises, she answers without flinching, “Semua perempuan nak yang besar. Mana ada yang nak yang kecil?” (“All women want big ones. Who wants small ones?”) Ruti (2018) describes pornography as “quick and clean, devoid of the messiness” that comes with “live sexual encounters” (p. 123). Ashiera’s viewers do not get this experience and instead, have to engage with her to obtain any form of satisfaction.

Besides Ashiera’s conversational live streams, she also dances in some of her videos. Although her dance moves would not be typically considered erotic – she simply moves side-to-side in time with the music – this is something that her viewers enjoy and often ask for. She usually starts these dance videos by sitting down and asking the audience for gifts. She only starts to dance after she has received the amount specified. Sometimes, she remains seated and just moves her body. Other times, she stands up and her whole body is visible on camera. In one of these dance videos, in which she showed the full-length of her body on screen, viewers began to leave descriptive and pornographic comments in the chat section. Some asked her to take her clothes off or if she is “basah” (wet). There were others that offered her their penis for satisfaction. One explicitly said “bawah basah abg kasi adik abg” (if you’re wet down there, I’ll give you my “little brother”). Another said “u best tak basa ii melekit cmtu?” (roughly: do you feel good being wet and sticky?). These comments echo what a porn actor / director might say during porn performances where the women typically respond agreeably or remain speechless, where they are a mere female object (Wright & Tokunaga, 2016). However, while Ashiera is dancing, she does not always look at the comments. When she decides to look at them, she chooses which comments she wants to respond to. Although Ashiera is using her movements to tease and arouse her viewers, there

is seduction but no satisfaction; Ashiera presents an idealised image that is not subject to heteropatriarchal control.

Figures 4 & 5: Screenshots of Bigo Live notifications from streamers and one of Ashiera's live streamed sessions, in which she performs a "sexy" dance while fully covered



Unlike other forms of alternative pornography (alt porn) that feature women from goth, punk, or rock subcultures who do not fit into the typical image of women in porn (Attwood, 2007; Paasonen, 2014) – supposedly what an ideal woman should look like – Baby and Ashiera *do* present the ideal image of what the Malay woman should be. However, the lack of care for production quality is a way for Baby and Ashiera to assert their own image. Neither Baby nor Ashiera take camera framing or settings into consideration i.e., the videos are often blurry and not shot from the best angles. Almost half of Baby's face is always off camera and the towel wrapped around her head can only be described as well-used. Ashiera does not use any kind of background screen or plain walls in her shoots, which speaks to the

level of production involved in her shoots i.e., they are low tech and under-produced. During her dance videos where she shows her entire body, one can see that she is performing for these videos in what looks like her home. In the background, it is possible to see her refrigerator, water dispenser and other kitchen appliances. Malaysian pornography on Bigo Live is never presented as high culture or intended as any kind of cultural representation. The Bigo Live app itself – with its crowded screens and confusing interface – does not indicate any emphasis on aesthetics. Bigo Live broadcasts are also very ‘busy’; they have a lot going on – comments flooding in, gifts popping up in the centre of the screen, bottom and top graphics. This is similar to the set up and design of Chinese – China-based – live streaming, which has its own version of gender performativity e.g., streamers dress up in skimpy, revealing clothing to talk about video games or on one occasion “forgot” to turn the camera off before undressing (Zhang & Hjorth, 2019).

Other platforms like OnlyFans, which became known in 2019 for how it “changed sex work”, allows users to subscribe to creators on the platform and gain access to content that may not be available on other platforms (Bernstein, 2019). Bernstein (2019) in his article in *The New York Times* quoted a sex worker Dannii Harwood in that article, who explained that “guys don’t want to pay” for porn. These men “want the opportunity to get to know somebody they’ve seen in a magazine or on social media”. She also said that she was “like their online girlfriend” (Bernstein, 2019). On OnlyFans,¹⁷ subscribers tip the entertainers and make requests according to their sexual tastes (Masters of Media, 2020). Fans are both directors and customers – telling the entertainers what they want, making payment, then getting it. There is a sense that influencers on OnlyFans are still seen as products that need to

¹⁷ In August 2021, OnlyFans announced plans to ban sexually explicit content because of restrictions from banking institutions (Matney, 2021). However, less than a week later, before the ban even came into effect, they reversed their statement (Parham, 2021).

be sold. Men who pay to subscribe are participating in the consumerist nature of pornography and expect satisfaction in the form of idealised imageries of their favourite porn performers. On the other hand, Baby and Ashiera make money from their performance, but do not offer a clear value or product given in exchange. They do not guarantee satisfaction and may not even acknowledge the men who buy them gifts. Although Baby does give out her phone number in exchange for specific higher value gifts (which translate to more money for her), she does not promise to respond to the men who may call or text her. It is possible that they meet the men outside of the Bigo Live platform to provide additional services. However, this too is not promised during the live stream.

What is key here is that since the performance in itself is not obscene, since it falls within legal, cultural and religious boundaries, there is no transgression even when it is public. Adhering to the requirements for what an ideal Malay women is supposed to be and complying to the prohibitions that have been put in place are what amplifies the seductive qualities of performers such as Baby and Ashiera. This not only enables them to perform pornography in public, but also puts them in control of their performances.

Conclusion

As seen in my earlier examples of Malaysian sex media, porn culture is not well-received but there are strategies for sex to be discoursed openly in the public sphere. What is key to note is that sex and even sexual pleasure per se are not seen as harmful or controversial, as evidenced by the ubiquity of references to sex on a range of platforms, as well as how sexual potency medications are sold (which we will see Chapter 2). In the Malay/sian sex media on YouTube and pornography broadcasted on Bigo Live, women's bodies may be idealised and objectified but the women themselves are not passive. They do

not challenge legal boundaries and rather than requiring liberation from religious and cultural structures, these prohibitions serve as a way to amplify the power of their performances.

CHAPTER 2

SHARING THE PENIS: HOW MALAY SEX MEDICINE REDISTRIBUTES

PHALLIC AUTHORITY

Although it has been over half a century since William Masters and Victoria Johnson formulated the *human sexual response cycle*, this four-phase physiological response during sexual intercourse continues to be the dominant model for understanding sex (Hyde et al., 2018). In their best-selling book *Human Sexual Response* (1966), William Masters and Victoria Johnson break down what they call the *human sexual response cycle* into four phases: excitement, plateau, orgasm and resolution (Masters & Johnson, 1966). Potts et al. (2004) call this “medical model of sexuality” mechanistic and observe that deviations from this “normal” cycle is considered a “sexual dysfunction” (p. 489). WebMD’s guide to the sexual response cycle encourages knowing how one’s body responds during each phase so that one can “pinpoint the cause of any sexual problems” (WebMD, 2020). This model is what informs the modern approach of associating sexual satisfaction with orgasm, where much of the discourse around sexual satisfaction are framed around orgasm, rather than pleasure (Fahs, 2014).

This framing of sex as work – where both partners strive to produce a desired outcome – is reflective of modern capitalistic society (Hyde et al., 2018). This chapter explores an alternative. In the first chapter, we briefly examined how the very public pornography produced by Malay women in Malaysia does not provide immediate satisfaction on demand. Instead, they make use of cultural and religious prohibitions to evoke pleasure without the climactic relief that one might expect from pornography. This chapter looks at how Malay penis remedies are marketed to show that normative sex that has become

hegemonic in modern capitalistic societies, is not being mirrored in Malaysia, where historical attitudes towards sex continue to persist even in the midst of colonial influences.

The capitalistic focus on sexual outcomes intensifies the separation between penetration and all the other parts of the sexual experience. Consider the term “foreplay”. It implies that other activities like kissing, manual stimulation, and oral sex are precursors to penile-vaginal intercourse or “real sex” (Hyde et al., 2018, p. 264). For penile-vaginal intercourse to take place successfully, the penis needs to be erect and stay erect long enough. Because of how visible the penis and male orgasms are, “unsuccessful sex” – where it is unable to produce an orgasm, in man and/or woman – typically becomes conflated with a lack of power and/or masculinity (Jordan et al., 2022). This emphasis on the erect penis evokes the psychoanalytic concept of the phallus, which as a symbol of power, is useful for navigating the association between the penis, sexual difference and social power. While the phallus is often associated with the penis in the West (Ruti, 2018), what the Malay sexual dynamic seems to indicate is that the connection between the penis and the phallus is tenuous (Rahmat, 2020).

In Malaysia, the more bilateral adat and pre-colonial Islam continue to have influences on sexual discourse. These too emphasised male competency in sexual relationships. In fact, in pre-20th century Malay manuscripts written during the Arab-Islam period before Western colonisation, there are references to how the sexually skilled man knows how to navigate the vulva and clitoris (Mohamad, 2021). However, also central to these texts is the emphasis on female libidinal desires and pleasures, as well as the importance of the broader male-female relationship. Musa (2021) wrote about a compendium of charms – compiled by a white magic practitioner known as Khatijah Terung – that included incantations and practices for making one’s husband “our serf” (p. 13). The text contained 53 lessons on how to “strengthen a husband’s body, make him attracted to his wife,

promote pleasurable sex, keep one's husband faithful, and ensure one remains beautiful" (Ding, 2006, p. 79). One particular spell included saying an incantation into limestone before rubbing it onto one's vagina and armpits (Musa, 2021). More recent representations of how a woman can supposedly gain control over her husband include the "straddled rice" (*nasi kangkang*), where a woman stands or squats over a rice bowl so that the steam causes her vaginal fluids to fall into it (Khoo, 2006). What this shows is that the "success" of sexual relationships are being discussed in different terms – orgasm, and even penetrative sex, are not the focus and women are active participants in the narration of sexual pleasures.

This chapter will explore these dynamics further but will first begin with a description of the Malay sex medicine landscape, which includes candy that is taken orally, as well as ointments for application onto breasts, butts, vaginas and penises. The ubiquity of this content, especially in how sexually explicit it is, shows that Malay-Muslim culture can be sexually permissive within marriage, where women are considered to have higher status (compared to unmarried women) and men have a specific set of responsibilities to uphold (Muhamad et al., 2021). Then, to explore a specific example, this chapter will focus on Instagram accounts selling a penis oil under the brand Hang Padu. This brand stands out amongst the other brands because even though it is selling the same product – an oil made from traditional ingredients – Hang Padu uses relatively modern methods for selling, utilising online platforms and overt statements of its use for sex and penis enhancement. It also makes use of graphics that further emphasise the product's use for sexual performance. While many traditional brands do make use of the Internet to sell their products – on online marketplaces or through messaging apps – their label designs mark them as traditional and provide very little information on their product, whether on the product listing or on social media. On the other hand, Hang Padu has informative packaging and labels, as well as supplementary information on various online platforms. While Hang Padu does not make full use of Internet

platforms or have the same aesthetics as modern sexual health lifestyle brands, they have certainly implemented their own form of content and social media marketing, as well as made use of search engine ecommerce platform optimisations. By looking at Hang Padu, we will see that women's pleasure is the driving force in the sale of these penis enhancing products. This is visible in the broader Malay sex medicine landscape as well, which will be covered in the later part of this chapter. First, an explanation of the phallus and how it relates to sexual intercourse in the Malay context.

The phallus and sexual intercourse

The phallus has long been associated with the penis, especially in societies where men (the possessor of the penis) hold political, economic and cultural authority (Ruti, 2018). In psychoanalysis this association with the genitals begins in early childhood when we are alienated from the imaginary phallus or “the image of the genitalia” after we discover its need to be kept covered (Miller, 2011, Ch. 5, *The Imaginary Phallus* section, para. 1). It becomes something that cannot be spoken of, which results in a feeling of loss, or in other words, a Symbolic castration. Eventually, this loss needs to be named and this is where the Symbolic phallus comes into play (Miller, 2011). Thus, the Symbolic phallus does not really exist but is, instead, the “signifier of the signified in general” (Lacan, 2017, p. 240). It is a symbol of the profound lack that every human experiences, as well as a symbol of the desire to fill that lack. It is not a fantasy, nor an object or organ. Rather, it is a privileged signifier. It stands in place of the various signifiers that we turn to in order to address our perpetual state of castration (Lacan, 2007). It is associated with masculine power, which in the Western context, includes qualities such as freedom, strength and authority or with activities such as conquering, commanding and exploring (Rahmat, 2020). However, this power is an illusion that the phallus can only sustain when it is hidden.

This is why Ruti (2018) writes that in order for the penis to show its phallic power, it needs to “remain veiled” and hide its “shrivelled reality” (p. XIII). Although the penis is not equivalent to the phallus, it is an “emblem of phallic authority” and is closely linked to the phallus (p. X). What this means is that neither men nor women actually have phallic authority; both are lacking in spite of the fact that men have a penis. The phallus stands in place of this lack and thus, is linked to castration, which Lacan suggests is “the human condition” (Ruti, 2018, p. XXI). However, while the penis is closely linked to the phallus, there is no equivalent for the female organ. Since the phallus plays a key role in the Symbolic order, it also serves as a signifier for sexual difference based on how one relates to it, or how one is sexuated. Sexual differences are not determined by biological organs or functions, but rather, by how a subject inhabits language (Lacan, 1998). Todd McGowan describes the two fundamental positions relative to the signifier are “masculine imposture” and “feminine masquerade” (McGowan, 2019, p. 3). In the former, one has to pretend to have something one does not, while in the latter, one has to act like something one is not. We see this manifesting in sexual intercourse, where both parties pretend to have what the other desires i.e., the man has to maintain an erection (he has the phallus) while the woman is the object of desire (she is the phallus). A woman might pretend to orgasm “as a method to fascinate a man”, which is her “form of identification with the phallus” or in other words, she becomes the phallus (Lippi, 2010, p. 82). Based on the extensive research on the topic, this seems to be a common practice (Fahs, 2014; Jordan et al., 2022; Lafrance et al., 2017; Younis et al., 2019). Faking orgasms is especially common among women who believe their partner’s manhood is challenged e.g., because they have lower salaries than their wives (Jordan et al., 2022). Faking orgasms was also more common during penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI) compared to other sexual acts such as oral sex, manual stimulation and even, telephone sex

(Fahs, 2014). Besides protecting her partner's masculinity, women also say that they fake orgasms because it is the "expected outcome" of sex (Fahs, 2014, p. 976).

What this chapter will show through examples of Malay penis remedy marketing is that although the marketing rhetoric focuses on female pleasure, female orgasm is not an explicitly stated outcome. Ironically, it is the male ejaculate – the point at which the penis loses its turgidity – that is the focus. At the same time, descriptions of female pleasure – which alludes to throbbing vaginas (@mumara_hq, 2022) – indicate that this pleasure is not passive. Thus, we will see that the phallus in the Malay context does not hold the same symbolic power as it does in the West. In order to understand the landscape in which these sex products are a part of, we will first need a broad understanding of Malay traditional medicine. Then, we will explore Malay sex remedies, for penis enhancements in particular.

Malay sex medicine landscape

In Malaysia, online marketing of health products has been ongoing for many years. According to reports, the use of online marketing on social media has turned it into a multimillion dollar industry, with sales achieving RM3.1 billion in 2019 (John & Alshahab, 2021). Many of these products are unregistered and unregulated by the Health Ministry, which means that there could be side effects when taken over a long period of time. However, these products continue to be promoted online, often by influencers or through user testimonials (John & Alshahab, 2021). Malay sex medicines are sold in a similar fashion, although there are some brands that do claim to have certificates from "USA" (*Americandy*, n.d.) or that their products are "formulated in the USA" (*AmeriCandy.kl*, 2021). Both claims are odd, because many of the ingredients used in the products, such as the *Tongkat Ali* root, are better known as libido enhancers in the Asian region. However, these claims may be the brand's way of distinguishing themselves from other traditional herbal remedies and

expanding their audience beyond the typical local traditional medicine userbase.¹⁸ In most cases, the most important certifications seem to be the halal certification – which marks the product as permissible or lawful in Islam – rather than any kind of registration with the Health Ministry. In promotions, many of them mention the fact that their formulation is halal as the most important feature. This is understandable, as obtaining the halal certification is a stringent process, administered by the Department of Islamic Development, in which a company has to meet a long list of requirements: Besides having to declare the product’s ingredients, as well as the processing and logistics of the product, companies who seek halal certification also have to ensure that the products do not lead to “perversion of faith, superstitious matters, and deception” (*Manual Prosedur Pensijilan Halal Malaysia (Domestik)*, 2020). So not only do these products – overtly visualised for their penile functions – have an Islamic stamp of approval, but they also meet quality control standards and fulfil similar requirements as Fair Trade. The importance of the halal certification spans across the wide range of products available in the sex medicine industry – from oils and creams for topical application to pills and candy that are taken orally. This mention of the halal certification is especially important because the Malaysian state polices any form of sexual intimacy outside of heteronormative marriage (Razif, 2020). It is not always clear if it is only married couples who are using these products, so it is possible that the sellers employ this as a strategy to prevent excessive policing from the Malaysian government or Islamic authorities.

While the sex medicines that I shall explore do not form the entirety of Malay traditional medicine – which might include a traditional healer called a *bomoh*, as well as

¹⁸ Americandy even went as far as to hire a creative agency to develop concepts and design graphics for their social media platforms. The agency stated on their website that their main goal was to get a bigger audience for Americandy (AMERICANDY, 2020). The westernisation of the brand name may be an indication that their target audience has more Western beliefs that are often equated with higher sexual promiscuity (Stivens, 2006).

ingredients for “magic spells”¹⁹ – they tend to be formulated based on natural ingredients such as roots and herbs, or even oils extracted from specific animals. Unlike modern medications, these products do not produce fixed biochemical reactions in the body. In fact, there are some that seem to work for myriad conditions, unlike modern pharmaceutical drugs that are created by isolating particular chemicals that act on specific and targeted sites of action in the human body (Deshaies, 2020). While modern medicine reduces a person to organs and cells, then even further into organelles and specific proteins, traditional medicine treats the human as a whole with two aspects – the body (physical) as well as the spiritual (Jamal et al., 2011). The physical is made up of four elements – fire (*suprawi*), earth (*suddawi*), wind (*dammawi*) and water (*balpawi*) and humours – damp, cold, dry, and hot (Jamal, 2006).²⁰ The spiritual aspect is made up of the mind and “soul substance” (*semangat*); lack in the latter can make a person vulnerable to the supernatural or evil spirits (Jamal et al., 2011). Thus, in traditional medicine, illnesses are caused by imbalances in the physical aspect, or by a loss of *semangat*. So for example, a “cold” illness would be treated with “hot” medicines and one might take herbal supplements in order to restore *semangat*. Besides these herbal medicines, chants, prayers, massages, abstinence (*pantang*) and other strategies are also employed for healing. This concept has roots in a range of other cultural influences including Indonesian, Chinese, and Indian traditional practices as well as those from the *orang asli* (indigenous people), Arabs, Persians and Europeans (Jamal et al., 2011). As more

¹⁹ There is an account on TikTok on which a woman sells *pengasih* (love spells) and *jamu* (herbal remedies), as well as postnatal services. The charms and herbals remedies she sells can be used for massages or to produce a range of effects – from beautification to preventing one’s husband from cheating. In one of the videos, she shows a two-step antidote for women whose husbands frequently have affairs: There is a white powder that women should apply to their vagina, as well as a yellow *azimat* (charm) that she should place under her husband’s pillow. This is only one example in a much larger industry of Malay magic practices.

²⁰ These are Arabic words that roughly correspond to the Greek humours – yellow bile (fire), black bile (earth), blood (air/wind) and phlegm (water) (Zakaria & Bahaudin, 2015).

herbal products became available, the Malaysian government introduced regulatory measures in 1992 – the Control of Drugs and Cosmetics Regulation 1984 – which stipulated that all herbal products for human consumption had to be registered with the Malaysian Health Ministry, which led to the beginning of systematic regulatory control over traditional products that were now sold in pharmaceutical dosage forms like pills, liquid preparations, lotions and more (Jamal, 2006). One example of this is Brazillian Secret by Mekra²¹ Beauty (@braziliansecretmekra, n.d.). It is a cream that comes in pastel pink packaging and those who sell it claim that using it can help lift the breasts and butt so that they become big and firm. The cream also prevents sagging, as well as removes stretch marks, scars and other skin blemishes (@braziliansecretmekra, 2021a). What is interesting is that based on some of the Instagram posts, this same cream can also be used as a stimulant for the penis – applying it the night before can result in a harder and larger penis the next day (@braziliansecretmekra, 2021b).

Figure 6: Screenshot from an Instagram story promoting the Brazillian Secret lotion



²¹ “Mek” is a word from the Kelantanese dialect that is typically used to refer to a young woman (Kelantan Today, 2016). Kelantan is considered the most Islamic state in Malaysia but as in Chapter 1, we see here again that Kelantanese women are not as repressed as outsiders may think they are (Abdullah Sani, 2015).

Although the copy makes claims related to the penis, the visuals are feminine – the video features a close-up of pink tubes of lotion and a hand with manicured fingernails rubbing the lotion onto what looks like an arm. The key implication here is that there is no clear or rigid distinction between male and female sex products. Although the product is packaged in colours which are typically classified as feminine (Tilburg et al., 2015), the content used to sell this lotion indicates that it can also be used by men. Based on copy in the other posts from the account, it also seems as if these promotions – even those that refer to penises – are directed towards both women and men. The copy makes use of the phrase “adik abang”. While *abang* is a word that means “older brother”, it is also used to refer to older male relatives and close friends, as well as boyfriends and husbands. *Adik*, which means “younger brother / sister” can be used by a woman to refer to herself when speaking to her husband, or it can be used as a reference to the penis (little brother). So in this case, the copy might be speaking to other women and mean “when you wake up tomorrow morning, your husband will be hard” or it could also be directed towards men and mean “when you wake up tomorrow morning, your penis will be hard.” The positioning of the bottles in the ad is also highly suggestive, with the uncapped tube in the middle resembling a penis. Of note is that the bottle colour is a similar shade of pink as the arm on which the lotion is being applied. The use of symbols to display sexual organs graphically is frequent in Malay sex product marketing, where promotions are either done by women, directed at women, or targeted to men who want to satisfy women.

An example of the latter is an Instagram account with the handle @beauty_sexylady that sells a range of products – including drinks (flavoured shakes and instant coffee), serums and lotions – that are meant to assist with skin whitening and healing, weight loss, lifting and firming (@beauty_sexylady, n.d.). Although the handle indicates that promotions are

targeting women, customer testimonials indicate that there are male customers too. And when products are designed for male use – typically to make the penis larger, harder, look better and last longer during sex – the marketing messages often refer to how these products will help them satisfy their wives. Again, the word “wife” is used in the marketing materials because in Islam, sex is only considered lawful in the context of marriage. Malaysia has a Muslim majority and in general, regardless of religion, premarital sex and homosexual sex are considered immoral (Abdul Hamid et al., 2020). Even in short films with clear product placement, storylines that revolve around male sexual competency implies that a “proper” man must satisfy his wife sexually. For example, a short ad-film sponsored by a herbal coffee brand called 5G Coffee (which as of 30th May 2020 has 424,846 views) began with a scene of a woman physically attacking her husband because he only lasted two seconds (GreenWorks Production, 2018).

The opening scene of the film shows a wooden house surrounded by greenery, indicating that the setting is a rural *kampung* (village), and within the first 15 seconds, we see a couple who are obviously post-coital. The camera shows a close-up of a woman sitting on top of a man, who is lying supine in bed. The woman berates her husband for underperforming during sex. She screams at him, saying that she married him because she thought he had a “*tubuh sado kuat*” (vigorous body). Her verbal attack eventually leads to a physical attack and as the husband struggles, she hits and scratches him while screaming “*tak puas*” (not satisfied). Eventually, her husband emerges with a face full of scratches. Throughout the scene, the woman is on top of the man and we can assume that they engaged in sex in that position as well. So not only is the man being violently reproached after the act; during the act itself he is not even in a dominant position.

The man eventually manages to escape his wife’s attacks by crawling out a window. Later, his father-in-law walks by the house and notices the man’s face covered in scars and

bruises. The man tells his father-in-law that he was attacked by his wife. The father-in-law's first response is to say, "There must have been something wrong." He implies that the man had made a mistake or done something to instigate his wife's anger. When the man tells his father-in-law that it was because he could not satisfy his wife sexually and claimed to have "lasted long, as long as two seconds." The father-in-law responds by hitting him on the head and saying that even though he is much older, he lasts two hours. He then beckons the man closer and whispers his secret for being able to last so long – 5G Coffee. The father-in-law tells the man that this is "important knowledge" that men must learn.

As the man is brewing the instant coffee, we learn that his wife takes it as well, which is why she is "as mighty as an ape".²² In the next scene, after the man drinks the coffee, we are only shown the window of their home but based on the sounds, we can tell that the man and his wife are having wild sex. He is growling and grunting loudly, while she alternates between moans and screams of "*sakit*" (pain), as well as that it's too much and she has had enough. Her moans of pleasure make it difficult to read this situation as rape, especially considering her earlier physical abuse of her husband for not being able to last long enough. The short film also displays the acceptance of unrestrained sex, even when it is loud and wild. As the animalistic sounds of sex continue, we see the woman's father in another room. He hears the sounds and realises what is happening but makes a hand gesture as if to say "there's nothing to worry about" before continuing with his day.

While women are generally viewed as less sexually inclined, this is not what is observed in the film or in the other content promoting products that increase sexual

²² The allusion to apes and monkeys is highly sexual and occurs more than once in the short film. Besides the man referring to his highly sexual wife as an ape, in an earlier part of this comedic short film, the father-in-law also has a toy monkey that supposedly helps him pluck coconuts. When the monkey fails at climbing the coconut tree (because it is a stuffed monkey), the father-in-law literally "spanks the monkey", a possible hint that he satisfies his own sexual prowess – presumably because he drinks the coffee – by masturbating.

performance, where women are not just portrayed as sexual beings but also as needing to be satisfied. Peletz (2006) in his article on early modern gender pluralism in Southeast Asia wrote about Europeans being shocked by the “exotic” sexual practices that were common at the time, which involved “surgically implanting metal bells, balls, pins and spurs in men’s penises” to enhance it for intercourse (p. 314). Men from Pegu (southern Burma) were “popular with the ladies of Malacca” because they would insert little round bells, the size of acorns or small plums in the flesh of their foreskin (Lach, 1994, p. 553). Besides increasing the size of the penis head, it also had “delightful treble, contralto, and tenor tones” (p. 553). Today, men still undergo similarly painful procedures to increase their penis performance (Premier Clinic Kuala Lumpur, 2020). A clinic based in Kuala Lumpur offers what looks like penis filler injections so that men can “bahagiakan isteri” (make their wives happy) with a penis that is “lebih mantap, besar dan tebal” (has better performance, is bigger and thicker). In a video promoting the service, a man’s penis is on full display while a gloved hand sticks a needle in and out of the head of the penis, slowly injecting a clear liquid all around the tip (see Figure 7). By the end of the seven-minute video, titled “*Dari Kacang Bendi ke Timun*” (from long bean to cucumber), the head of the man’s penis is covered in blood, which streams onto the sheet underneath as well. This is reminiscent of plastic surgery operations that women get in order to embody the femininity that is supposedly required from them. The description that accompanies the video – which again, stresses on how a man can satisfy his wife²³ – indicates that even when modern medical processes are utilised, it is in service to the woman.²⁴

²³ The exact phrase is “bahagiakan isteri anda dengan zakar yang lebih mantap, besar dan tebal”, which means “delight your wife with a penis that is steady, big and thick”.

²⁴ In an article on penis fillers that was published by BBC News, Kelsey (2018) wrote about men turning to penis fillers as a way to address their low self-esteem. One of the men interviewed talked about how he opted for a 10ml filler so that he would feel more comfortable when walking around naked among other men in the local gym’s changing room (Kelsey, 2018).

Figure 7: Screenshot from a YouTube video showing the penis filling procedure



In Instagram posts promoting a herbal candy that is supposed to produce erections, overlay text includes references to “isteri” (wife), with the implication that consuming this candy will make one’s wife desire them more (@hangpadupahang_official, 2020a, 2020b). Although the design uses strong, bold colours, which can be understood as masculine, the main visual – a man and woman in coital-related positions – is reminiscent of romance novel covers, which typically target a female audience (Drake & Radford, 2018).

Figures 8 & 9: Digital Posters for Promoting Americandy on Instagram



The text in graphics respectively translate to “If your penis is powerful, your wife will feel it” (left) and “Want your wife to cling on to you during this lockdown?” What is interesting here is the focus on women’s pleasures and desires, as well as the lack of emphasis on phallic conquest. The non-gender specificity of these products also indicate that women are using these products to please their partners. This implies a shared responsibility in sexual pleasure. In another Instagram post promoting the Brazilian Secret lotion, a woman wearing only a denim jacket poses with a burger (@braziliansecretmekra, 2021c). The text overlay includes the phrase “padu, memang rasa kelainannya” (solid, you’ll really feel the difference) and “3box dah mcm kayu balak” (three boxes will make it like a log) but because of the image and the remaining copy, it is ambiguous as to whether the product is meant for use on the breasts or on the penis.

Figure 10: Screenshot of an Instagram post promoting the Brazillian Secret lotion



While the caption mentions that the main aim of the product is to have the man’s penis keep growing, for it to be longer, bigger and never shrink, it is unclear whether the woman should use the lotion to make her breasts large so that her male partner will stay hard and long or if she should get her male partner to use the lotion on his penis so that he will stay hard and satisfy her. In either case, her satisfaction is the goal. This idea of female

appetite is further emphasised in the image used where the woman holds a burger with one hand while she sucks on the finger of her other hand with a satisfied expression.

Equally as often, male bodies are used along with female bodies to sell penis products, which makes it even more unclear as to who the target audience of the product might be. Some of the content looks like tamer versions of the “unsolicited dick pix” that a woman might get when exchanging sex-related text messages with a man; typically, these include a view of the abdomen and thighs, with the penis at centre of focus. Since many of these photos are published on Instagram, which has its own set of compliance requirements with regards to pornography, the penis is not shown in a full state of undress. Instead, many of these photos show the tip of the penis peeking out from beneath tight-fitting briefs. In one of these shots, a man places a bottle of Kencang Padu (the brand name of another traditional massage oil for sexual health that means “fast solid”) beside his erect penis. The head of the penis is clearly seen in the image (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Screenshot of an Instagram post promoting Kencang Padu



In the caption, he writes about how he feels more confident after using Kencang Padu and reveals that this is his secret to a seven-inch penis. He urges interested buyers to send him

a direct message or click the link in his bio. At first glance, it seems as if he is selling the product to men. However, the hashtags indicate another possibility. Listed among the other generic hashtags related to massage oils are #rahsiapikatsuami (secret to seducing your husband) and #suamipadu (solid husband). These are hashtags are clearly directed towards wives.

In another Instagram story of Kencang Padu, a satisfied customer sends the seller a photo of his chest covered in semen and says that since he began using the product a month ago, he masturbates every day, but his ejaculate never decreases (see Figure 12). While this can be read as an increase in virility and masculinity, this image stands out in that the body on display is male. While the cumshot is a typical feature in modern pornography – to the extent that porn category tags and titles include where a man ejaculates e.g., man cums in pussy, cum on neck compilation, etc. – the image is typically semen on a woman's body, not a man's. When we look at other textual feedback provided by customers for other penis products, some of the positive statements include “*takut terpregnant*” (worried about accidental pregnancy) or “*menambah air mani*” (increase semen), there is a sense that the man's sexual competency does not lie only in his erect penis, but also in his ability to reproduce. Even though the sex might be recreational, the penis must do more than stay hard; it has to give out something more. This disturbs the concept of the “male gaze”, which “explicitly positions women as objects of male desire” (Ruti, 2018, p. 104). Instead, in these scenarios, we see the opposite; male bodies are put on display in order to appeal to female desire. As mentioned in Chapter 1, what we continue to find is that “Malay modernisation has produced an uneven gender regime” that is “locked in a contest between a masculine modernisation... and the Malay contexts' longer standing history of matrifocal and feminine cultural influence” (Rahmat, 2020, p. 33). This contest and the idea of power negotiation

between the genders is reflected in the language that is used in the marketing of these products, as well as in broader Malay erotic discourse.

Figure 12: Screenshot from an Instagram story promoting *Kencang Padu*



As an example is the phrase *suami tewas awal*, which directly translated means “husband loses early” but is used when referring to premature ejaculation or a man ejaculating too quickly (before his female partner is satisfied). This choice of phrase is especially interesting because it implies that a man always “loses” when he ejaculates; it is simply a matter of sooner or later. In her book *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings*, Ruti refers to Lacan’s “phallic detumescence or evanescence”, which explains “how the penis inevitably falters at the very moment of delivery” (Ruti, 2018, p. 177). She writes that “male orgasm is just another name for castration” and this is why “Lacan draws an explicit link between male orgasm and anxiety” (p. 177). This anxiety manifests differently in the Malay

context. Although a man is expected to stay hard and last longer, which is an almost universal expectation, this is not just to show his prowess or tied to his level of masculinity. Instead, the purpose for his erect penis is feminine pleasure, specifically, his wife's pleasure.

Searching for the hashtag #suamitewas on social media platforms like Instagram reveals a small number of posts (less than 100) promoting these sexual health products. One of these posts – selling a “performance gel” called Gambir Emas – featured a close-up of a male torso with muscular chest, abs and arms (@gambir.emas.petaling.jaya, 2017). In the image (see Figure 13), the strong, muscular man is in the background. What stands out are the forearms below the man's torso, which are positioned in a V-shape that gives it the appearance of fallopian tubes, with the fists symbolizing ovaries. The performance gel brand with the tagline “a true man's secret”, is positioned strategically over where the cervix and vagina would be. Not only does the image imply that a husband's power is derived from his wife's satisfaction, it also indicates that the female organs are powerful in their own right.

Figure 13: Screenshot of an Instagram post promoting Gambir Emas



Although the post makes use of hashtags such as #suamipower and #suamiperkasa (“husband power” and “husband mighty” respectively), what is also notable is the use of

hashtags such as #isterisenyumpuas, #isterimelekat, #sayangabang and #isterisayangsuami (“wife smile satisfied”, “wife sticks”, “love husband” and “wife loves husband”). This shows that although the product and its marketing are designed for a male audience, female desire is the driving force. These hashtags also indicate that the product itself is directed towards couples or individuals in heteronormative relationships, in which there is a husband and a wife. There is a historical, Islamic basis for sexual pleasure in man-woman relationships. Sex manuals from the Arab-Islamic world, that were circulated in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago before European colonialism took place, provided information on improving sexual pleasure in relationships (Mohamad, 2021). These listed extensive information on sexual techniques, diet and food taboos, medicine, mantras, charms and more, with the fulfilment of women’s desires as the central component. Reproduction was not the main goal but rather, a development of “love and amorousness” between partners (Mohamad, 2021).

Given that we now have an idea of the Malay sex medicine industry, we can now consider the politics behind it. For this, we take a closer look at how female pleasure is the key feature in penis performance products. This, in turn, can give us insights into how the phallus manifests in the Malay context. To do this, we will focus on one specific brand – Hang Padu.

Hang Padu

Hang Padu is brand of *minyak belacak*, which is said to be an oil concentration from the mudskipper,²⁵ an amphibious fish (suamisihat, 2020). These oils are typically sold in small bottles and are applied and rubbed onto the whole penis. Hang Padu stands out in the way it is packaged, the fact that it boasts both halal certification and Ministry of Health approval, as well as in how it is marketed. Customers are told that when they buy the product,

²⁵ Another oil that is said to act as *ubat kuat* (medicine to increase libido) is *minyak lintah*, which is leech oil.

they receive a series of three videos that provide details on how to use the product effectively. The first video teaches them how to massage their penis so that it grows longer and bigger. The second video teaches them how to last longer and fix issues such as a curved or bent penis. The third video is a training video, which apparently details a painful process that a man needs to do once or twice a week in order to get to the next level of sexual performance (@hangpaduoffhq, 2020a). Besides videos on other platforms like YouTube, sellers also use Instagram videos that provide more information about the product. Unlike other similar oils sold online, where customers can only click through a Whatsapp link and must initiate a conversation in order to get more information, Hang Padu provides information openly on a range of online platforms. The brand owner makes use of stockists and agents to sell the product. Thus, there are many Instagram accounts promoting the product using largely similar tactics. The @hangpaduofficial Instagram profile uses a mixture of videos, photos and screenshots of messages with customers, which most of the other accounts have emulated.

While some of the videos do feature attractive women performing seductive movements, which indicate that the product marketing is targeting men, there are other videos in which this does not seem to be the case. For example, in one of the Instagram Stories on the @hangpaduofficial account, there was an IGTV video that featured a compilation of men performing the TikTok “Cat Lick Moon” trend (see Figure 12). This trend involves pretending to be a cat while licking according to the rhythm set by the TikTok sound “Cat Lick” by Moon (Moon 晓月, n.d.). The first video in the compilation featured a man putting his hands up as if holding something open (rather than the usual cat paw simulation), then delivering a long, hard lick in between his hands. Although the trend itself is not necessarily sexual, this compilation video was titled *Kuat Jilat Bhai* (can be translated to mean “dude who licks well” or “good licks dude”) and can be read as sexual because of account sharing it, as well as the nature of the other content featured on the Instagram

account. Another video featured fingers playing with various fruits splayed out to look like a vagina while *When We* by Tank played in the background (@hangpaduofficial, 2020a). In this case, they are obviously meant to simulate pornography. The video opens with the image of a finger thrust into the centre of a very wet grapefruit (see Figure 13). As the finger is removed, liquid seeps out from in between the fleshy parts of the fruit. The rest of the video proceeds along the same lines, with different fruits like peaches, strawberries and plums. The fact that a song that is explicitly about sex, with lyrics like “Stroke is gettin’ deep and faster”, is playing in the background does not leave much room for other interpretations of this video.

Figures 14 & 15: Screenshots of an Instagram story and post promoting Hang Padu



These videos stand out because although they are marketing penis products they do not focus only on penetrative sex. While Viagra and other modern medications for erectile dysfunction place emphasis on the penis and its supposedly correct purpose – for penetration with the goal to produce orgasms – many of the @hangpaduofficial videos exhibit other methods for feminine pleasure. The same caption is duplicated across almost all posts on the

account. It starts by asking whether a man wants to be “thick, big, long” (*tebal besar panjang*) and if he wants to attract all kinds of women from virgins to widows and divorcees (*dari perawan ke janda*). This is similar to the messaging used in Malaysian marketing of modern medical products such as the penis filler injections (see p. 54) or medications (see andSons, n.d.). These also recognise the need to satisfy women and do not indicate that there is any shame in requiring a little help. Ruti (2018) writes about how society accords social power to the “possessor of the penis” but also describes how she makes use of a pen as a “portable phallus” to “project authority” (p. XX). In the case of Hang Padu, the penis might be attached to men’s bodies, but it seems as if it is owned by women. In this case, the portable phallus is literally the penis, which we continue to see acting as a tool in service to women. All attempts to make it bigger, more powerful, last longer, or look good are done with the aim of female satisfaction.

Even in the testimonials shared, a lot of the feedback includes how the man who used Hang Padu was able to satisfy his partner in bed. In one of these posts, a man writes a Whatsapp message to the Hang Padu seller saying, “Alhamdulillah... terbaik boss. Mlm tadi isteri saya sgt2 puas.. saya terpaksa tutup mulut dia kerana menerang kuat sgt! Takut anak dengar..” Translated this means, “It was the best. My wife was very satisfied. I had to cover her mouth because she was moaning too loudly, and we were afraid our child would overhear.” It is telling that success of the product in this case, is the wife’s satisfaction (@hangpaduofficial, 2021a). So not only does the customer mention his child in a conversation about sex, but also starts his testimonial with a religious phrase that means “praise be to God” or “thank God”. This seems to indicate that there is no separation between religion and sexual pleasure. In the Malay context, good sex is something that is not just

condoned by religion – part of the Symbolic – but in fact, encouraged.²⁶ What is additionally interesting about these testimonials is that there is a focus is on the process – what is taking place during the act itself, rather than the end of it (orgasm).

In another of these testimonial posts, a man says that he was able to “*tahan lebih lama*” (last longer) and follows this up immediately with a comment about how his partner was very happy. After the seller asks him how much his penis had increased in size, the customer says that it grew about 1.5 inches (even Viagra cannot produce this sort of size increase). He added that it had gotten broader and that it “filled his partner’s mouth” (@hangpaduofficial, 2021b). What we see here is that the enhancements to the penis are not necessarily for “productive” sex. It is also telling that partner appetite and satisfaction is the central focus of the success story and the part of the conversation that the seller chose to screenshot and highlight in the post.

On top of highlighting female satisfaction as success stories, it is also very common to see videos of women promoting these products. Zarina Anjoulie, a Malay female celebrity and social media influencer when promoting a penis oil on Instagram, started an IGTV video by telling her male cousin that he “needed it” to perform better (@anjoulielavocah1, 2020). Then, holding up the bottle in front of her husband she tells him, in Malay, that it will help him last longer, make his penis harder and longer, that it will *make him ejaculate more*. She says all this in a straightforward manner, while her husband smiles and stares quietly at the camera. Neither of the men shy away from the camera or look ashamed of being told that they need a product to perform better at sex.

²⁶ In a conversation I had with a Malay friend, he talked about his “kursus kahwin” (marriage course). The ustaz (religious leader) who was doing one of the lectures emphasised that “men really need to take care of their health” because he had encountered many divorce cases due to wives’ sexual dissatisfaction. He said, “I can’t count how many divorce cases I’ve seen happen because the wife was not satisfied.”

Thus, we see that the phallic authority associated with having a penis does not solely belong to men. In fact, it seems as if the penis is something that is shared. There are also videos on the @hangpaduofficial Instagram account – in posts, as well as Stories – in which women talk about how “this viral product” will help men who have issues with size and length of their penis or “tak tahan lama” (cannot last long). In one of these videos, a woman in a very low-cut blouse talks about Hang Padu in a breathy, semi-pouty voice (see Figure 14). Besides highlighting the fact that all the ingredients used are “natural products from the village, with no chemicals”, she also adds that most importantly, the product is halal (@hangpaduofficial, 2020b). What this shows is that women selling these products to men, or even buying the product for their male partners is not seen as something damaging to the Malay male ego.

Figure 16: Screenshot of a woman promoting Hang Padu on Instagram



There are also many videos which feature men talking about the benefits of the product, as well as how to use it effectively. What is more fascinating, however, is that there are other videos that feature men displaying their bodies in a manner that can only be described as erotic, even though they may be fully clothed. In a video promoting Hang Padu,

a man holds a bottle of the oil at his groin, drawing attention to his penis, which moves and jerks seemingly with a life of its own under his pants (@hangpaduoffhq, 2020b). At some point, as if the penis has moved too far, the man gently pulls it back, nestling it closer to his body. He handles it as if it is a wild creature that is separate from himself. This is also indicated in the caption, where he writes “*kote ni nak mencanak je tak kira waktu*”, which roughly translated means “this penis wants to breed all the time”. He goes on to add that his female colleague is always asking him why his “bulge is always up”, which seems to imply a lack of female fear towards the erect male organ.

Figure 17: Screenshot of an Instagram video promoting Hang Padu



Although it seems like Hang Padu’s purpose is to turn the penis into a kind of beast that is powerful – stronger, bigger, has higher endurance – this power is in service to female desire. As we have seen in the Malay context, the “penis’s phallic status” is “disjointed from the symbolic order” and its “meaning cannot be fixed” (Rahmat, 2020, p. 165). Despite the widespread recognition of the penis’s failure to maintain its phallic qualities, it is not equated to a loss of masculinity. In a talk show produced by a major television broadcast channel,

which addressed erectile dysfunction, male callers speak to the hosts and guest doctor about their challenges with erectile dysfunction (TV3MALAYSIA Official, 2019). Although the doctor recognises it as an issue, he addresses it as if it is a common occurrence. He talks about possible solutions and even recommends lifestyle changes to prevent further issues. In another YouTube video uploaded by a user who is also promoting “*ubat kuat lelaki*” (male power medicine), an *uqtaz* gives a sermon on the proper duration for sex and how Malaysian men have fallen short by only being able to last “5-7 minutes” (Tengku Kunin, 2014). This is, in fact, a practical issue as impotence is one of the valid grounds for divorce in the Islamic courts (Peletz, 2002). In an article, which appears to have dubious sources and is also promoting a sexual health product, a woman apparently divorces her husband because he was unable to “last long” (Afiah, 2019). “*Baru dua minit dah game over,*” she was quoted as saying, which means “it’s game over in just two minutes.” Based on these examples, we see that “the Malay phallus cannot be veiled” and that its power “cannot be represented or mythologised”. Although “Malay phallic anxieties” exist, these anxieties are not a result of “masculine hegemony” (Rahmat, 2020, p. 165). While there is a need for the man to maintain an erect penis, it is not to fulfil a requirement of masculinity but rather, a way to produce female pleasure (and at times, offspring).

A female libidinal economy

There is a historical basis for why female pleasures and desires are the driving force in the sale of penis medications in Malaysia. For a long time in Southeast Asia, women had “more freedom and economic agency” compared to their European, Chinese or Indian counterparts (Reid, 2014). Prior to what Reid (2014) describes as the “high modern” period, when state and corporate structures were developed by “exclusively male hands” (p. 152), Southeast Asian women not only managed their households’ funds but were also in charge of

running businesses – engaging in activities such as marketing, buying and selling – without male assistance. In the late 19th century, male leaders from Malay states such as Johor began to copy the “European exclusively male pattern” in an attempt to be seen as civilised (Reid, 2014, p. 152). However, since they had never developed entrepreneurial skills, modern business was left to the Chinese, while their wives continued to run the “arena of domestic business” i.e., small business (p. 152). Although there are also small businesses run by men today – many Hang Padu sellers are men – historically, small enterprise is a domain pioneered by women and continues to be driven by women. Some notable examples include Neelofa and Vivy Yusof, who found success in the fashion industry, as well as Datuk Seri Hasmiza Othman (better known as Datuk Seri Vida) who built her empire in the beauty industry before moving on to other areas including sports.²⁷

Although it has been over a century since Malaysia has embraced Western-influenced heteropatriarchal modernity, anthropologists have recognised that significant fluidity in gender and sexual identities still exists.²⁸ Women might have conceded superiority to men in the areas of politics and formal religion but this has allowed them more freedom in everyday and small businesses (Reid, 2014). Traditionally, a woman who generated her own income – through work or business – commanded more respect from her community, compared to a

²⁷ Neelofa and Vivy Yusof are popular celebrity entrepreneurs who became highly successful in the fashion industry and continue to grow multiple brands, whilst Datuk Seri Vida, expanded into other areas beyond the beauty industry that she initially found success in. After growing her business with the sale of cosmetics and health supplements, even local football clubs looked to Datuk Seri Vida as their source of funding. In 2016, she sponsored the Kelantan FA and forced them to change their official jersey colour from red to pink (Iman, 2016). More recently, there have been rumours that she is looking to buy the football club from another Malaysian state, Perak FC (Bernama, 2021). What may be more surprising is that supporters are not concerned about a woman owning the club. Rather, they see it as an opportunity for the club to have stronger financial backing.

²⁸ Although Western liberal activists are constantly advocating for recognition of more than two genders, they are still looking for these other genders to be named and defined, which does not indicate the same kind of fluidity that is experienced in Southeast Asia.

woman whose only source of income was her husband (Karim, 1987). Although Malay women may have had control over domestic finances, the woman who earned money had a higher status than one who merely controlled her husband's earnings. Within the practices of Malay adat, status was based on age and marital status, rather than gender (Karim, 1987). What this meant was that involvement in specific rituals and practices was not limited by gender, but rather by age. It is not surprising then, to find that Malay women like Neelofa, Vivy Yusof, and Dato Vida continue to play dominant roles as entrepreneurs even in this age of modernity. This, combined with the Islamic practices of husband-wife responsibilities in sexual relationships, provides a strong basis for why the sex medicine industry continues to be driven by men's desire to please women and to "share their penis".

Conclusion

The idea of normative sex in the modern context – which Malaysian students learn in high school biology – typically follows a medical model of sexuality and deviations from this model is considered a sexual dysfunction (Hyde et al., 2018). This model places emphasis on the ability of the penis to stay erect long enough and ends with ejaculation. When the penis fails, modern drugs are used to provide a quick fix and reassert masculinity. While Malay penis remedies are also designed to improve the penis – i.e., make it bigger, longer, harder – these Malay penis remedies have to be used regularly, over a period of time. It is not an instant solution and it is not to "repair broken masculinity". Rather, the main purpose of the enhanced penis is female pleasure. While the erect penis is closely associated with the phallus in the West, this connection is not as stable in the Malay context. Based on how Malay sex remedies are marketed, we see that despite Islamic and Western capitalist influence in Malaysia, Malay phallic authority does not lie solely in the hands of the men. What this chapter shows is that female desire is paramount in narrating the sexual relationship between

men and women, and that patriarchal dominance does not extend to all aspects of Malay social life. Chapter 3 of this dissertation will show that even in situations where they do not have authority, Malay women employ a set of strategies to reassert control.

CHAPTER 3

OCCUPYING THE ABJECT: HOW MALAY WOMEN USE *GANGGUAN* TO EXPRESS THEIR BODIES

The sexualised female body with its ability to bring life into the world has typically been viewed as a “site of danger” that incites fascination and horror (Ussher, 2006, p. 1). The idea of a natural or normal reproductive body is a product of discourse and language i.e., it is a part of the Symbolic, the Lacanian register that involves the function of speech. A woman who exhibits deviations from this expected normality – in other words, she cannot control her “unruly body” – is seen as abject (Ussher, 2006). These deviations, which lie outside of discourse and language, as well as challenge the stability of one’s (imagined) reality, are regarded as the Real that disrupts the Symbolic. They are moreover regarded as “monstrous” when they do not conform to the dominant sociocultural structures in place, which are typically patriarchal (Ussher, 2006). In Western media – especially from Hollywood – this monstrousness manifests in horror movies as possessed female bodies, witches and vampires, castrating and primeval mothers – or what Creed (1993) terms the “monstrous-feminine”. These horror films act as sites of purification of the abject, which “disturbs identity, system order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

In Malaysia, however, and specifically in the Malay context, the monstrousness is often encountered through supernatural *gangguan* (disturbances). These refer to afflictions that are attributed to supernatural creatures such as *hantu* (the equivalent of ghosts or spirits in English) and *jin* (djinn or genie), who are monstrous in an almost literal sense because not only are they often described as uncanny and frightening, Muslims believe they come from another realm beyond the physical, a realm which has a mysteriousness that is often spoken of as horrifying. Women who experience *gangguan* visit traditional healing centres, where

treatment involves communicating with these spiritual beings. This chapter considers the monstrosity in these situations to see how these treatments allow Malay women to speak about abject, feminine problems and in doing so, assert individual control over their particular situations. Rather than a total enforcement of controls over their unruly bodies, the disturbances provide a channel through which these women can confront the horrifying aspects of their bodies – e.g., hormone-driven emotions, pregnancy changes – and negotiate with the monstrousness to assert their individual needs and wants. So, while female deviations from the norm may be disturbing to existing structures, women are still afforded the necessary signifiers – i.e., the supernatural – to speak of and to the abject, while acknowledging that it lies beyond the rational and cannot be fully explained.

Because the terms abject and monster are central to my analysis and they evoke many different things, I will begin by explaining them and how they apply in the Malaysian context, especially in light of how modernity has resulted in a regulation of Malay women's bodies. Since we are also dealing with the supernatural, which is too extensive to include in a single chapter, the big picture overview will focus on the supernatural in relation to *gangguan*. What is key here is the mainstream and taken for granted status the supernatural has in the Malay symbolic order. Next, I shall look at stories with supernatural mentions between June to August 2021 (three months) on the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) Confessions website.²⁹ These stories have been a constant feature on the website for years, and although not all are explicitly sexual, many of them are sexed in that the stories portray jin targeting women and are used to explain issues such as uncontrollable emotions, bodily pains (including vaginal pain), and dreams of sex. I will show that in these stories, the

²⁹ IIUM is a public university founded on Islamic principles and is sponsored by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (the second largest intergovernmental organisation after the UN, as well as the collective voice of the Muslim world) (Premier Islamic University, 2007; Sponsored by the OIC, n.d.).

uncontrollable aspects of women's bodies and emotions manifest in the form of *gangguan* and rather than being repressed, the *jin* is spoken to. Thus, there is a deeper communication with the Real, rather than exclusion from the Symbolic where the Western feminine abject is situated.

The abject and the monstrous

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva (1982) describes the abject as “impurities” that threaten borders between self and Other. She cites Mary Douglas (1969) and Jacob Neusner (1973), who define impurity as “that which departs from symbolic order” and “what is incompatible with the Temple,” to say that both definitions are concerned with social order (p. 91). But Kristeva (1982) goes further and asks where this social order is derived. Her answer is: “phallic instinct” (p. 167). Due to this phallic nature of the Symbolic, the feminine – the “other sex” – becomes a threat, “synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 70). Thus, while the woman is “caught up” in this phallic order, there are a lack of signifiers that can fully account for her desires and experiences (Morris, 2020), which means that many of these desires and experiences are situated in the Real.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Real is defined by the absence of signifiers and cannot be “reduced to meaning” (Morris, 2020, p. 14). Thus, it cannot be sufficiently represented in the Symbolic or the Imaginary – what we may view as reality – and instead is “experienced as something that intrudes the subject”. Thus, sexualised femininity – as opposed to idealised femininity – is abject because it fails to be “stable” or “rational” within a patriarchal Symbolic order (Morris, 2020, p. 14). Because woman is “always in the Imaginary” – there is an ideal image that she has to uphold – her bodily changes and secretions, as well as desires become signifiers of pollution or the abject and she is subjected

to “disciplinary measures” in order to “drain the Real” (Morris, 2020, p. 19). Like the feminine, the monster is also a creation of discourse – it does not exist without cultural order and at the same time, is outside of the order that has created it. Weinstock (2020) cites Asa Mittman’s suggestion of the monster as “that which threatens understandings of the world, the self, and the relations between the two” (p. 3). In other words, the monster is a “conceptual category for things that don’t fit” (Weinstock, 2020, p. 3). It is the abject that requires purification.

In the past, prohibition and religious rites were methods of “purifying the filth”, but Kristeva posits art and literature as other forms of purification rituals (Kristeva, 1982). Creed (1993) builds on this to say that horror films with female monsters – what she terms the monstrous-feminine – act as a “defilement rite” that redraws the boundary between “maternal semiotic authority” and “paternal symbolic law” (p. 14). So, while women are not inherently monstrous, the Symbolic order positions them as such when they do not conform to the ideal image of what a woman is supposed to be. Because the monstrous-feminine refuses the phallus, she threatens gender binaries, as well as the notion of what it means to be human. Ussher (2006) reminds us that the monstrous-feminine in Creed’s analyses of horror films are “misogynistic fantasies” and more a reflection of phallic anxieties (p. 2). So, although the monstrous-feminine may be given expression in the horror film, she is ultimately repressed on screen and thus is not given a voice in the actual Symbolic order.

This is how the monstrous-feminine has typically been represented in Southeast Asia as well. These representations of the monstrous-feminine have been used to reconstruct repressed anxieties (Tan, 2010), show how female sexuality disrupts the family (Mills, 1995), make sense of the tension between the traditional and contemporary (Nicholas & Kline, 2010) and to represent feminist resistance to patriarchal dominance (Izharuddin, 2020). Often, the monster takes the shape of one of the most well-known female Malay monsters:

the pontianak. Popularly referred to as a female vampire, she is the vengeful spirit of a woman who has died while pregnant or in childbirth. In Malay-language cinema, she is typically portrayed as a woman in white with very long hair covering the back of her neck where there is a hole (Izharuddin, 2020). In order to subdue the pontianak, one has to drive a nail into the hole in her neck. This turns the pontianak into a beautiful and submissive woman (Nicholas & Kline, 2010). In *The Laugh of the Pontianak*, Izharuddin (2019) writes about the abject qualities of the pontianak's off-screen laughter in Malay-language horror movies. She reads it as a symbol of abject femininity and undermining of patriarchal oppression, especially because in Malay society, "socially permissible" laughter in young women is "barely audible giggles" (Izharuddin, 2020, p. 5). In these pontianak movies, the pontianak's laughter signifies victory but it is momentary and pyrrhic. She is eventually "vanquished by a man" or is "cast alone" because she continues to walk the earth even after she has lost everyone she loves (p. 12).

Aziz and Asaari (2014), however, present a different idea of monstrosity in their analysis of the film *Damping Malam (2010)* (The Night Companion). In this case, while there is a main female character – a mother – who has "irrational" anxieties and desires, the monster that drives her is a jin, who is not necessarily gendered but is often positioned as a signifier of patriarchy (Aziz & Asaari, 2014). The jin first causes anxiety in the mother character, then later becomes her desire personified, before "running amok" and requiring subduing (p. 87). Thus, the mother is not the monster, but rather, *has* a monster that acts as a "palimpsest for masculine dominance" (p. 82). Aziz and Asaari (2014) use the jin to show how cultural mechanisms trap women in a patriarchal realm and that while it asserts its force on the woman, her husband is also powerless against it – the ending of the film criticises the husband for not being able to balance career and family, as well as his impaired masculinity. So even though the abject feminine is ultimately repressed, this analysis also gives us a

clearer example of how fragile Malay masculine authority really is. In fact, it can be negotiated with, as we shall see, in the later parts of this chapter. But before we go into more detail about the supernatural and how *gangguan* is treated, the next section will provide a quick overview of how Malay women's bodies have been and continue to be regulated in Malaysia.

Control of Malay women's bodies

In the 1990s, the influences from the capitalistic Malaysian state and various forms of Islamic resurgence led to controls of Malay womanhood, her body and reproductive roles (Ong, 1995; Stivens, 2006). As “competing forms of postcolonial nationalism” (Ong, 1995, p. 161), both state and Islamic influences attempted to realise their versions of modernity by emphasising family values and asserting control over women, who have typically been seen as synonymous with the “family” (Ong, 1995; Stivens, 2019). State interferences in areas that were governed by Islamic law and personal desires – such as family planning – led to tensions between spouses, and worse, did not even achieve the state's goals to reduce family size and increase agricultural development because men actively resisted their initiative; in fact, birth rates were higher during that period compared to previous decades (Ong, 1995). As part of this initiative, contraceptives (in the form of oral pills) were promoted to village women but this modern concept of health and sex was seen as a challenge against Islam, “male conjugal rights”, and men's “moral authority” over women (Ong, 1995, p. 169). These rights and authorities were further challenged when young women began to join the work force. When industrial development led to a demand of cheap labour, families in the villages sent their daughters off to work at factories in urban free trade zones, which led to further divisions in the family, as well as a change in traditional gender dynamics. Women who used to be dependent on their male kinfolk now had their own income and besides competing with

their male peers for jobs, had “the money and social freedom to experiment with a newly awakened sense of self” (Ong, 1995, p. 172).

This, however, did not mean that young women had more freedom because although they were no longer dependent on their parents or male relatives, they were now beholden to the labour market and the state (Ong, 1995). They also could not escape other forms of social controls, which took shape in the form of discourse. These young women were referred to as “*minah karan*” (high voltage Minah), “*kaki enjoy*” (pleasure-seekers), and “*perumpuan jahat*” (bad woman) – phrases which draw attention to the supposed moral problem that these women were causing because they were seen as sexually available (Ong, 1987, p. 179). It was not just the general Malay public who framed it as a moral issue, but also the media, politicians, administrators, educators and Islamic groups. In 1980, Mahathir Mohamad who was the deputy prime minister at the time, made a note of what he called loose morals of female factory workers but because he was a “champion of the export-industrialisation program”, his solution was for people to “guide the young girls to the right path” (Ong, 1987, p. 179). The next year, orientation programs were set up for women so that they “would not fall into the trap and discard their traditional values in town” (p. 182).

Women’s response to this was to construct a more positive gender identity, which resulted in an identification with an “intensified Islamic asceticism” (Ong, 1987, p. 191). This religiosity was advocated for by Islamic resurgence movements and had an emphasis on purity and “a new kind of sexual repression” (p. 191). At the same time, since women still had a familial obligation to contribute wages, many postponed marriage. Thus, they continued to hold a “junior” status within their families, which was problematic because families now had to ensure that the virtue of their adult daughters remained guarded (Ong, 1987). The women themselves believed in the “Malay vision of society” that was “Islam-informed, dominated by men” and in which they “could not seek social autonomy” (p. 192).

Later, as further government “depeasantisation” initiatives took effect and more women graduated with university degrees, they found themselves caught between the job market and marriage (Ong, 1995, p. 180). They worried that postponing marriage would lead to being “priced out of the marriage market” and thus sought to maintain male authority, rather than challenge it (p. 181). This involved subscribing to the Islamic values of the time.

One of the most visible markers of Islamisation and its effects on the control of women’s bodies is the adoption of the *tudung* (headscarf) by Malay Muslim women, which began to increase in the mid-1970s (Stivens, 2006). The containment of women’s bodies was seen as a symbol of containment of the social ills caused by the capitalist economy (Ong, 1995). While the West views the veil as a “threatening symbol of political Islam” or by feminists as a sign of backwardness and female oppression, Malay women had more diverse perspectives (Hochel, 2013, p. 42). Some viewed it as a reminder of their religious commitments, others saw it as a strategy to protect themselves from male attention or to be judged based on merits rather than looks. Some chose to eschew the *tudung*, with the reasoning that they were not ready to display their commitment to Islam (Hochel, 2013). While Malay women in Malaysia have a choice as to whether they wear the *tudung*, what is key here is that their choice would be judged either way – if they do wear it, they are viewed as oppressed, if not, they are immoral.

Due to the “morally ambiguous position” of the modern Malay woman, there is still a “widespread state-led and Islamic religious moral policing of women” – many of which involve issues related to “family” (Stivens, 2019, p. 298). In the 1990s, this produced the concept of *Asian Values* or *Family Values*, as well as the idea of the *Islamic Family* (Stivens, 2006). In conversations about this ideal, women have been positioned as protectors against the “wrong kinds of modernity” (Stivens, 2019, p. 299). “Dangerous” modernities include a “too free”, “too Western” modernity and what is seen as related to it, including feminism,

secularism, pluralism, socialism and same-sex or non-binary gender relations (Stevens, 2019, p. 299). However, while women are expected to uphold the family, they are also seen as a threat to it because of their positioning as “most vulnerable to Western pollution” (p. 299).

This unstable and ambiguous status led to a sharp increase in “spirit possession episodes” in the 1970s among young Malay women working in urban free trade zones, as well as in boarding schools (Ong, 1987, p. 204). These cases involved groups of women who would sob and scream hysterically, and sometimes resulted in work disruptions. The media reported many cases of mass hysteria and listed causes such as “examination tension”, “stresses of urban living”, and “superstitious beliefs” (p. 204). Ong (1987) however, cited Lewis (1971) who suggested that spirit possession episodes in women are disguised protests against the dominant sex – their distress caused by possession “called public attention to their subordinate position and sought to alleviate it” (Ong, 1987, p. 207). But in the case of Malay women, possession was more than an unconscious protest against male authority; it was also a retaliation against “labour discipline”, especially because there were significant differences in Malay and capitalist views of the human condition (p. 207). Spirit possession in the form of individual *gangguan* can also be read in a similar manner and that is what this chapter shall focus on because it involves a communication between the Symbolic and the Real. In cases of hysteria, communication has broken down and women are no longer able to verbalise their suffering. *Gangguan* however, can be treated and treatments begin with talking to the monster. What this means is that even when the system attempts to control women, Malay women are able to negotiate with it and in many cases, reassert agency. If Chapter 2 showed that the idea of a masculine Symbolic is unstable, this chapter further shows the spaces where the Real can intrude. It is in these spaces that Malay women are able to develop strategies to respond, negotiate and express their desires.

Negotiating with the jin

Negotiation is a key aspect in traditional treatments of the jin disturbance. Women who experience gangguan will typically visit a traditional healing centre, where the healer³⁰ – who is often referred to as an uztaz (religious teacher) – will conduct treatments to deal with, but not necessarily cure, the gangguan. The traditional healing typically takes place alongside, before or after modern medical approaches (Md. Sa’ad et al., 2017). In some cases, healers may first ask their patients if they have sought any diagnosis or treatment from a medical doctor. In other cases, the healer might refer their patient to a hospital if they do not find any indication that the illness is a gangguan. Sometimes patients are afflicted with issues that can be solved with modern medicine, *as well as* gangguan; the healer would then assist with the gangguan portion (Md. Sa’ad et al., 2017).

In order to provide a better understanding of gangguan, and how it is treated, this section will first provide a brief overview of the supernatural in Malaysia. Since it is such an extensive topic,³¹ the focus will be on the very tiny portion of it that relates to gangguan. What is pertinent is how pervasive the supernatural is in Malaysian society. One giveaway is the fact that the authoritative Malay dictionary in Malaysia lists over 25 types of hantu or ghosts (*Kamus Dewan Perdana*, 2020). It is believed that these hantu are sometimes owned by sihir (magic) practitioners who deploy them to inflict pain on chosen victims (Nur Azmina

³⁰ A Muslim faith healer has knowledge of and is skilled in using Quranic verses, Hadith and other methods permitted by Islamic law for treatment (Razali & Tahir, 2018). These are different from Malay traditional healers who are called bomoh, pawang or dukun and may not practice healing methods that are in line with Islamic creed or law (Ibid.). However, they may have incorporated Islamic healing into their repertoire and refer to themselves as ustaz (Ibid.). This has resulted in some confusion and interchangeable use of the labels ‘Muslim faith healer’ and ‘Malay traditional healer’ (Ibid.).

³¹ Several European (mostly British) scholars such as William Skeat, Richard Winstedt and James McHugh have attempted to capture the Malay supernatural in writing. Skeat’s book – *Malay Magic* (1900) – is almost 800 pages and still does not cover the supernatural in its entirety.

et al., 2020).³² This pervasiveness of the supernatural applies to the jin as well; it is not just a creature in popular media, but also a feature embedded in daily living. According to classical Islamic beliefs, the jin are “intelligent and subtle beings” that humans could have relationships with and seek help from (El-Zein, 2009, p. xv). While there are different classes of jin in Islam – including ghouls, ifrits, marids and so on – they are classified differently in Malaysia, and indeed are distinct from jin elsewhere.³³

What is more important than their classifications is the fact that they have been given a name. Since the use of language is a prerequisite for being a part of the Symbolic order (Lacan, 2006, p. 252), this invocation of the jin can be seen as a participation in the existing sociocultural structure. Indeed, mentions of jin are commonplace, not just on confession websites, but also as fables and moral tales on religious websites (Sifuli, 2014), in erotic stories on pornographic blogs (*Sang Iblis*, 2013), and as feature articles in popular magazines

³² In fact, *sihir* is so commonplace that in 1993, some Malaysian leaders called for it to be classified as a crime under federal law (Peletz, 2002). At the time, the Islamic Courts were already handling cases in which they suspected the use of *sihir*. For example, in one divorce case, a woman told the court that even from the first day of her marriage she “couldn’t stand looking at her husband’s face”, which a court official explained was a result of someone performing “love magic” on her (Peletz, 2002, p. 220). Although these reasonings do not have official legal standing, officials continue to make informal notes about sorcery or charms in these cases.

³³ I have chosen to use the Malay word “jin” instead of *jinn*, *djinn*, or the anglicised genie in order to distinguish between the Islamic *djinn* and the Islam-influenced jin in Malaysia, which has its own set of characteristics and behaviours. The Malaysian types tend to refer to the jin’s behaviour and how a person becomes involved with it, rather than the jin’s own characteristics. Thus, a single jin might fit into more than one of these categories at the same time. For example, some jin types one might hear of commonly are *jin saka*, *jin sihir* and *jin asyik*. *Saka* – which comes from the Malay word *pusaka*, which means heirloom – refers to a jin that has been inherited (Aziz & Asaari, 2014). In some cases, a person might have dabbled in magic or made a promise to a jin in exchange for help, and this jin is ‘inherited’ by their descendants. *Jin sihir* might be a jin that latches on to a person because someone else cast a spell (Uztaz Shams, 2020). *Jin asyik* are jin that fall in love with humans and may even have sexual relationships with them (Huzir, 2021). The word *asyik* in the Malay language has multiple meanings (*Asyik*, n.d.), which are difficult to translate directly into English. Depending on the context it is used in, it can connote both distraction and extreme concentration, but one explanation that captures it rather aptly is the phrase “carried away”.

(Foad, 2000). Beyond everyday conversation or popular media, it is also a prominent feature on the Federal Territory Mufti's official website, which provides advice for what Muslims can or cannot do based on the Quran and other scripture (Nanji, 2009).³⁴ This website, which is the main reference for practitioners of Islam in the Federal Territories, contains articles that provide answers to questions about jin based on the Quran and Hadith. Questions range from whether one is allowed to "use the services of jin" to whether women should wash their used sanitary pads because the jin might "*makan darah haid*" (eat the period blood) (Abdulrahman, 2018; Muhadi, 2018).³⁵ There are also many references that list symptoms of gangguan caused by hantu or jin – which is sometimes referred to as "possession".

Abdul Rahman et al (2019) categorised the symptoms under six factors: abnormal thoughts, faith delusion, scary dreams, sleep disturbances, low mood, and hallucinations. Besides these, some experts also included symptoms such as paranoia, seizures, anxiety, and inexplicable physical pains (Abdul Rahman et al., 2019; Rafiq et al., 2014). Based on the symptoms described by women on the IIUM Confessions website, gangguan almost always results in uncontrollable and inexplicable body or emotional issues – often manifesting as chronic physical suffering. They may experience a range of effects that include bruising with unknown causes, sex dreams, vaginal pains, or being groped while sleeping. Within the scope of traditional healing, there is a method for diagnosing gangguan. When dealing with jin, the healer would typically use *ruqyah*, a healing method which involves reciting verses from the Qur'an and/or the Hadith (Md. Sa'ad et al., 2017). In order to check if a patient's issues are being caused by a jin (as opposed to some other kind of physical or mental illness), the healer

³⁴ Basically, the Mufti is the official state authority on Islamic law.

³⁵ Amidst articles about whether jin can die or if a human can marry a jin, what stands out is that there are no questions or answers that challenge the existence of jin. In fact, the answer to the first question – which is taken out of the Surah al-Jin (72nd chapter of the Quran) – is that Muslims are not allowed to ask or receive help from jin because this makes them "more arrogant, proud and evil" (Abdulrahman, 2018).

would conduct ruqyah and if the patient reacted to it by vomiting, crying, screaming, talking in strange voices or displaying a sudden change in personality, it meant that they were experiencing gangguan (Md. Sa'ad et al., 2017).³⁶ Once the patient's suffering has been identified as gangguan, the healer can then move on to the next part of the treatment – talking.

There are various stages in and requirements for the treatment to be conducted successfully but the core part of it involves summoning and speaking to the jin or the person with the gangguan (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1999). If the healer is able to summon the jin – who will communicate through the patient's mouth – he will ask who it is, why they are in this particular person's body and other details. If the healer is unable to speak to the spirit, he will speak to the patient and ask for more details of her suffering – if she has had dreams, what those dreams contain and so on (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1999). What is key here is the talking and the use of words to identify the symptoms. Although the monster – in this case, the jin – is never fully rationalised, it acts as a signifier through which the Real of the woman can connect with the Symbolic.

The supernatural, including the jin, is represented in a range of media across many different platforms and it would be impossible to explore them all in entirety within this chapter. Thus, this chapter will focus on a specific genre of supernatural story – the confession. The next section will go into textual analysis of supernatural stories from IIUM Confessions (IIUM Confessions, 2014). These occur on a regular basis; a cursory browse through articles published in just three months – from June to August 2021 – revealed close

³⁶ In a YouTube video from earlier this year, a faith healer conducted healing on a female university student. When he entered her dorm room, she was already down on all fours and making growling noises. Eventually, the healer manages to speak to the jin and as he begins asking for more details, the 'jin' through the woman's mouth begins to shout its answers. Throughout the session, as the healer speaks, the jin's (or the woman's) response alternates between screaming, shouting, crying and vomiting (Pusat Rawatan Syifaa, 2021).

to 40 stories that either had the supernatural at the centre of the confession or as a reasoning for the problems being confessed. Besides providing an overview of and classifying the types of supernatural mentions, this chapter also examines the gender dynamic in these stories.

Confessions of the supernatural

In the last few years, university confession pages have grown in popularity across the world (Budryck, 2013; Simon, 2013). So many of these are hosted on Facebook to the point where they have been referred to as “Facebook confession pages” (Birnholtz et al., 2015; Hayman et al., 2018). These confession pages are hosted on other platforms as well. No matter the platform, what they have in common is that since page administrators, as well as the confessions are anonymous, these confession pages have provided an avenue for confessors to talk about sexual assault, mental illness and other taboo topics, as well as to seek help, give advice or complain (Barari, 2015; Hayman et al., 2018; S. Smith, 2021). The IIUM Confession website follows these conventions as well, but how it differs is in its supernatural content.

From June 1 until August 31, 2021 there were 38 stories on the IIUM Confessions website that explicitly mention the supernatural. While all the articles make mention of religion in some way – sometimes in the form of prayer within the confession itself or include supplications for prayer from the reader – these were not included in my analysis. However, they were taken into account when considering the broader context of the supernatural stories. The supernatural is not simply a guise to talk about the taboo, as there are also confessions that explicitly mention topics that are generally considered taboo or controversial in Malaysia including pre-marital sex, sexually-transmitted infections, non-heteronormative sexuality, pornography, mental illness, and issues related to the feminine body including breast cancer, endometriosis and menstruation (Ahmad et al., 2011; Haque, 2005; S. H. Lim

et al., 2020; Mohd Mutalip & Mohamed, 2012; Wilson et al., 2020). Because of the anonymous nature of the confessions page, these topics are referred to using other strategies besides the supernatural³⁷ or in some cases, even referred to explicitly.

The invocation of the supernatural occurs in very specific situations, such as cases of medically inexplicable illnesses, during long-distance road trips, or in schools and school dormitories. Due to this anonymity, it is also difficult to ascertain the exact demographics of the confessors but in the stories, there were confessors who owned houses, drove cars, and used smartphones. One of them who listed his profession said he was a public clerk. This seems to indicate that it is not just the working class who experience magic and hauntings, but also those from the middle classes. However, there are also references to how they build their own houses on family-owned plots of land, being the subject of rumours in their *kampung* (village) or living in “a state up north” i.e., outside central urban Malaysia. This shows that supernatural experiences span across a diverse demographic.

It was also difficult to determine the gender of the confessor because Malay language pronouns are gender neutral. In some of the stories, they do specify if they are a man or woman, but in stories where they do not, I used other details in the story e.g., “I am a mother with five children” to determine the gender of the writer. I have marked these in Table 1 and

³⁷ A Malay word that is frequently used to refer to sex outside of marriage as *terlanjur*, which roughly translates to “slip”. In one of the stories on the IIUM Confessions page, a 30-something woman writes about how she met a younger man on social media and has been chatting to him to stave off her loneliness because her husband works in Brunei and cannot travel back to Malaysia during COVID- 19 (Anonymous, 2021). She says that she almost met the man, who is 13 years younger than her, several times and they almost *terlanjur*. The only reason that has not happened yet is because of movement restrictions due to the pandemic. She even explicitly states that she knows she has sinned (*berdosa*) but she has no choice because she is following her lust, which she writes as “*n4fsu*”. The link to this story shared on the IIUMC Facebook page received almost 1,000 comments, which indicates that there is possibility for open discourse on these topics (IIUM Confessions - BM, 2021).

what was observed is that about three quarters of the stories are written by women. There is also a marked difference between the stories written by men compared to those written by women – the men typically do not experience the same kind of bodily suffering. For example, in *Driver DiRasuk Di Leburaya* (Driver Possessed on the Highway), a man is a passenger in his friend's car. After the friend is suddenly possessed, the man simply takes over the wheel, drives to the nearest town and seeks help. In *Bukan Rumah Biasa* (Not An Ordinary House), a man buys and moves into a house in a remote area against his family's advice. He writes about the ghosts that he has seen and how he acknowledges their presence, but they never do him any harm. While these stories are still imbued with horror elements, they do not contain the same kind of chronic suffering. These stories also show that the supernatural can manifest in many ways in Malaysia.

Table 1: Supernatural stories from the IIUMC website between June to August 2021

Title of story	Supernatural category
Saka, Takdir Atau Kebetulan (<i>Saka</i> , Fate or Coincidence)	sihir
Sakit, Tapi Doktor Kata Tak Sakit Apa-Apa (Ill, but the Doctor Says Otherwise)	
Sihir & Cara Memulihkannya** (Curses and How to Break Them)	
Siapakah Suami Aku? (Who is My Husband?)	
Berbaloikah Sihir? (Is Practising Magic Worth It?)	jin / sihir
Akhirnya Aku Yang Dutuduh Menyihir (In the End I Was Accused of Sorcery)	
Mental & Saka (Mental and <i>Saka</i>)	jin / saka
Dilema Miskin & Mental (Being Poor and Mental Illness Dilemma)	
Peribadi Berubah Jadi Teruk Kerana Sakit II (Personality Change Due to Illness II)	jin
Peribadi Berubah Jadi Teruk Kerana Sakit (Personality Change Due to Illness)	

Isteri Perawat: Kisah Pesakit & Ragam Mereka (Healer's Wife: Patient Illnesses and Their Varieties)	
Ilmu Hitam dan Pendamping III (Black Arts and Companions III)	hantu / jin / sihir
Di Kacau** (Disturbed)	hantu / jin / pocong
Di Kacau II** (Disturbed II)	
Di Kacau III** (Disturbed III)	
Di Kacau IV** (Disturbed IV)	
Di Kacau V** (Disturbed V)	
Bukan 'Rumah' Biasa* (Not a Normal House)	hantu
Siapa "Dia"? (Who is It?)	
Pelesit & Dengki Manusia (Pelesit and Human Envy)	gangguan / jin / pelesit
Jangan Bagi 'Dia' Masuk (Don't Let It In)	gangguan / jin / langsuir
Saka Keluarga** (Family <i>Saka</i>)	gangguan / jin
Lembaga Hitam III (Dark Figure III)	
Lembaga Hitam II (Dark Figure II)	
Lembaga Hitam (Dark Figure)	
Apakah Ia Atau Siapakah Dia? (What or Who is It?)	
Mulut Capoi & Histeria II (Reckless Mouth and Hysteria II)	
Gangguan Bilik Baru Opah II** (Disturbance in Grandma's Room II)	
Gangguan Bilik Baru Opah** (Disturbance in Grandma's Room)	
Mulut Capoi & Histeria (Reckless Mouth and Hysteria)	
Kisah Seram Asrama (Dormitory Horror Stories)	gangguan / hantu / jin
Menjaga Pesakit Halusinasi	gangguan

(Caring for a Person Who Hallucinates)	
Bidadari Syurga Suamiku (My Husband's Angel in Heaven)	
Menantu Psycho II (Psycho In-law II)	
Menantu Psycho (Psycho In-law)	
Driver DiRasuk Di Lebuh raya* (Driver Possessed on the Highway)	
Mainan Tidur Atau Sebaliknya (Sleep Play or Otherwise)	dream / sihir
Ketenangan Itu (That Calm)	dream / jin

* *Confessions written by men*

** *Unable to tell if the writer of the confession is male or female*

This is why this chapter classifies the stories according to the main types of supernatural elements included in the story. A couple of the occurrences within the confessions happened while the writer was asleep and dreaming – which have been noted in Table 1 – but the bulk of the confessions take place while awake. When a specific type of supernatural being is mentioned, they are included in the categorisation as well (see Table 1). Note that there is a difference between the mere appearance of supernatural beings and *gangguan* (disturbance), where the latter typically includes some form of effect on the body and/or bodily suffering. As shown in the table, about half the stories include *gangguan*. In the stories where *gangguan* does not take place, the supernatural being is present and may or may not be a threatening presence, such as in *Bukan Rumah Biasa* (mentioned earlier) and the *Di Kacau* (disturbed) series of stories.³⁸ In both these stories, the writers have seen jin or hantu and have even interacted with them by acknowledging their presence but have not been

³⁸ *Dikacau* means “disturbed” but cannot be used interchangeably with *gangguan*, which has a more disruptive quality.

harmed. In these stories, the supernatural beings are much like other humans one might meet on the street or like a neighbour one might greet.

It is in the confessions by women that we see something else happening in relation to the supernatural. Although the confessional genre historically began in a patriarchal context (the church) and was later reinforced by men like Foucault and Freud (Cornett, 2011; Shaw, 2012), in its modern form confessions have been referred to as a feminised genre, in which “women manipulate the confessional framework” to challenge patriarchal entrapment and talk about personal (often excessive or transgressive) and sexual experiences (Gammel, 1999, p. 9). We see this happening on the IIUM Confessions website, where majority of the confessions are written by women. The women do not always mention it explicitly, but disappointment is latent within these confessions – not only the disappointment of the confessor, but also the other women who are featured in the confessions. Since they are confessions, rather than novels or movies with a complete story arc, there is often a lack of narrative detail, and it is not possible to verify the information provided. We do not know the whole story, or indeed even if the stories are true. However, the responses on the IIUM Confessions Facebook page – where links to the blog posts are posted – indicate a collective recognition of these struggles (@iiumcbm, n.d.). In one confession where a woman was accused of *sihir*, the corresponding Facebook post had over 300 comments – most of which were providing advice on her situation, rather than calling out the invalidity of her story (@iiumcbm, 2021). Despite their unverifiability, when these confessions are placed against the larger cultural backdrop, we see that the supernatural is being used as a placeholder and a strategy for women to negotiate with a system that constrains them by stipulating what a woman should or should not be.

Invoking *jin asyik* in confessions

Many of the *jin asyik* gangguan are sexual in that they target women, especially those who are at the boundaries of specific developmental stages in life. I will analyse three stories from IIUM Confessions. In the first story, a newly adult woman shares her frustrations towards hormonal changes and marriage. In the second, a soon-to-be mother expresses her fear and anxiety during her first pregnancy. In the final piece, a girl starts to experience gangguan when she reaches puberty. There are several reasons as to why I chose these stories: firstly, because the women themselves experience the gangguan, unlike some of the other stories where it happens to someone else. Second, these women are also not healers or healers' wives, who would usually take regular precautions to protect themselves from gangguan. Third, I selected these, rather than those with school dormitory or shared student accommodation hauntings, because they do not focus on hysteria, which is something that has been explored before such as in Aihwa Ong's *Spirits of Resistance*, where women living in factory dormitories claimed possession and exhibited hysteria as a form of resistance to the demands of capitalism (Ong, 1987). Fourth, these stories are focused on the female body – its reproductive abilities, as well as its related bodily changes and excretions – which has been a site of fascination and fear, across cultures throughout history (Ussher, 2006). This is pertinent because the female body “stands at the centre of surveillance and policing of femininity” (Ussher, 2006, p. 4). This surveillance and policing are done externally – by the media, culture, religion etc – as well as internally, by women themselves. While the external gaze positions the non-ideal woman as “mad, bad, or dangerous”, self-surveillance can lead to dieting, exercise, and eating disorders (p. 5). In the Malaysian context, we have also seen how the state and Islam exerted controls on women and their bodies. Finally, in both these stories, the women's experiences are tied to the liminal – in-between stages where there are gaps in signification. In the first story, the woman is sexually mature, but not yet a wife. In

the second, she is married and pregnant, but not yet a mother. In the third, the woman's gangguan began when she reached puberty. Observing these liminal phases allows us to see the intrusion of the abject, and the women's subsequent confrontation with it.

In *Apakah Ia atau Siapakah Dia?* (What is It or Who is It?), Lily wrote about how she began to exhibit signs of hormonal changes in the form of severe acne when she was age 20, while she was away from home for university (Lily, 2021). It got so bad – she describes it as large, swollen and painful – that an elderly woman asked her to see a religious healer, implying that the acne was caused by a jin. After seeking treatment at some healing centres, Lily discovered that indeed, she was suffering from gangguan. During the time Lily was experiencing this gangguan, she also experienced difficulties with romantic relationships. She said that the jin had strong effects on her relationships with any man that she “tried to love.” She would suddenly feel disgusted, which made her not want to contact those men anymore. The effects were so strong that it even led to her breaking off an engagement. This is not a simple break-up as formal engagements in Malay culture involve ritual exchanges that are on par with marriage exchanges (Peletz, 2002). The fact that Lily remained single even though she was of marriageable age was also an issue because prolonged singleness is generally seen as a social problem in Malaysian society (Ibrahim, 2018). Besides the oft-cited health and fertility issues that might occur in older women, the other problems brought up in public discourse include pre-marital sex – which is prohibited in Islam – and the weakening of the family institution. A woman of marriageable age who is unmarried is dangerous because she might engage in illicit sexual activities in an attempt to fulfil her natural desires (Ibrahim, 2018).

As a young adult who was attending university away from her home state, and thus, away from her family, Lily was in a similar situation as the factory women in Ong's (1987) *Spirits of Resistance*. She was sexually mature, unmarried and no longer under the watchful

eye of her family. At the same time, she was experiencing a body that she was not able to control – her acne continued to get worse despite her efforts to treat it. It was only after she went home during her semester break that she felt “one burden disappear” and her skin began to improve. Although she continued to have breakouts, it was no longer as bad as before. But she continued to feel “something” watching her. The anxiety and disgust evoked by the abject was only alleviated after Lily met a healer who was able to speak to the jin.³⁹ Through her sessions with the healer, she discovered where the jin came from and what it wanted. The healer told her that it wanted to “just be friends” and after Lily said she did not want to befriend it, the healer conveyed the message to the jin, asking it to “go back” to where it had come from. Lily was given a list of practices to follow in order to prevent further gangguan, which included bathing in her mother’s bath water and not taking naps in the afternoon. Lily writes that eventually she was able to get married – to a man “who knows her story” and is “patient when she acts up for no reason”. After she got married, the gangguan almost completely stopped. At times, Lily would still be able to feel the jin’s presence, especially because her “instincts became stronger,” but she would continue to tell the jin that she did not “want to be friends” with it.

In her confession, Lily does not say much about her dating experiences or the men she dated before her husband but even with societal pressures related to being a young, sexually mature woman, she is able to stay unmarried, and even break an engagement, because of the jin. The jin provided a way for her to explain her dissatisfaction with the men she dated, as well as to deal with her uncontrollable acne. When she goes through with her marriage –

³⁹ Before she met a healer who was able to help her, Lily visited other healing centres where she would exhibit the typical signs of gangguan but the jin could not be summoned and the healer could not speak to it. During her treatment sessions, her whole body would shake and her fingers would tap on the floor. Although she was under 45kg and shorter than 150cm, even men with strong bodies (rugby players) could not hold her down.

which can be seen as a legitimate containment of her sexuality and sexual desires – she does so on her own terms, to someone who can accept her the way she is.

Ussher (2006) writes that if the fecund female body is abject, the changing pregnant body stands at the “pinnacle of that which signifies abjection” (p. 81).⁴⁰ In *Pelesit & Dengki Manusia*, Munirah writes about the gangguan she experienced when she and her husband first moved into their rented house after they married, which became worse during her pregnancy (Munirah, 2021). It began with frequent arguments, which sometimes became so intense that she would ask her husband to leave her. Whenever they were home together, she and her husband would be overcome with hate and anger towards each other. Not long after they married, she discovered that she was pregnant.

The first year of marriage is typically a challenge because it involves adjusting to new living arrangements (Mohd Noor et al., 2019). There are also culturally-influenced expectations that individuals might have going into the marriage; for example, a man was expected to set up his own home in order to establish his authority over his wife and children (Ong, 1995). In this case, it may be possible that Munirah’s husband was not able to buy their family a home, which was why they had to rent – and later in the confession, we also learn that he spent time playing video games until late at night and would leave Munirah to go to bed alone. It may not come as a surprise then, that Munirah’s gangguan became worse during pregnancy, which is a liminal period. When pregnant, the female body is no longer “closed, smooth and intact” and looks as if “it may tear apart, open out, reveal its innermost depths” (Creed, 1993, p. 58). The hormonal changes during pregnancy – which results in heightened emotions, nausea, darkened nipples and enlarged breasts, thin skin, sweat and other bodily

⁴⁰ Many of my female friends with children, when describing their pregnancies, birthing experiences or breastfeeding, have often said that they felt “like an animal”. Although motherhood may be upheld as an important role for women in society (Stivens, 2006), the bodily processes threaten the boundaries between being human and being animal (Ussher, 2006).

excretions (Ussher, 2006) – could have further exacerbated Munirah’s feelings of no longer being in control of her life. Not only is she unable to control her body, but she is also married to a man who is not always there for her.

When Munirah begins to experience uncanny occurrences, her husband does not believe her right away. She says that he saw it as a bid for his attention. For example, one night, her Waze (a smartphone navigation app) turns on in the middle of the night and tells her “you are at the wrong way.” She tells her husband, but he just listens and does nothing. Another night, she is in the toilet when she hears “a big thing walking” on the roof of her neighbour’s house. Frightened, she quickly gets up and the toilet door – which she had left open because she was afraid – slammed shut. She tries to open it but is unable to. She screams for her husband but he is asleep and does not hear. The door only opens after she says some prayers. One night, her husband goes out and stays out till late (past 11pm) because it is raining, and he rides a motorcycle. Munirah falls asleep with the TV on because she wants to “avoid loneliness.” She wakes up to the sound of a marble falling right behind her and then a TV ad for the series Detik 12 Malam (12 Midnight Moments) comes on. She starts crying uncontrollably out of fear because she recognises it as a supernatural occurrence since the show had been cancelled. After that, Munirah insists that if her husband decides to go out at night, he would have to bring her along. Besides all these occurrences, Munirah also experienced constant pain in her vagina. She says that she went to the hospital many times for the pain, but the doctor would always say that there was nothing wrong with her.⁴¹

⁴¹ Sudden stabbing vaginal pains are common in pregnancies but often not discussed because it is considered “routine pregnancy pain” and not taken seriously by medical professionals (Wozolek, 2019). Medically referred to as “round ligament pain,” it is a result of round ligament inflammation due to foetal movement. Although it is common enough to have a colloquial name – lightning crotch – and can be so painful so as to “take the mother’s breath away” or even affect her current movement in that moment, these pains are not discussed in public spaces such as pregnancy classes (Wozolek, 2019, p. 879). However, in Munirah’s story, we see that these pains are seriously addressed and not seen as normal or routine.

Eventually, Munirah's husband realises that her hauntings are real – because he too begins to see spectres in their home – so they tell their parents, who recommended religious healers for the couple to visit. One of the healers they met with told them that their rented house was haunted by a jin that a previous tenant had left behind. Apparently, this jin “liked fetuses,” which is why it increased its disturbances after Munirah became pregnant. The healer also felt the presence of a *pelesit*, a cricket familiar-type spirit that typically has an owner.⁴² From speaking to the *pelesit*, the healer learned that someone who was also in love with Munirah had sent other “things” to her because they “wanted her to miscarry” and for Munirah and her husband to “get divorced.” The healer told Munirah that the vaginal pain she felt was something inside her trying to force a miscarriage.

He performed several exorcisms and later tells her that she knows the person who has been doing this to her, which leads Munirah to suspect that it may be one of her coworkers. Since she works in the construction industry, she is frequently surrounded by men, specifically migrant men from Bangladesh and Indonesia many of whom are working illegally in Malaysia. She writes in her confession that they enjoy working with her and that many of them have fallen for her. She adds that they are “sweet”, so sweet that even the “Malay sweet talkers” cannot compare to them. However, some of them have also professed to perform black magic. After talking to her husband, Munirah decides to resign from her job, changes her phone number and “filters her Instagram friend list.” She does not say if she completely stops working or if she goes on to find a job somewhere else, but after leaving the

⁴² This owner could be a human (usually a woman) or another familiar spirit, the *polong*, which is created by bottling the blood of a murdered man (Hamdani, 2007). The *polong* is typically also has an owner and when sent out to do tasks, would usually send its pet, the *pelesit* in advance. After the healer removes the *pelesit* from Munirah and her husband, he bottles it and says he will keep it.

construction job and cutting contact with specific people (she does not say who she deleted from her Instagram), her moments of rage and the other hauntings cease.

What is interesting here is that although she is pregnant, she is still seen as a sexual woman who is desirable to men. Typical cultural representations display the ideal mother as non-sexual. Even pornography becomes more subversive when it disrupts proper notions of what motherhood should be by displaying pregnant women as sexual beings (Ussher, 2006). We do not know what the exact situation is, but based on Munirah's confession, the attention she receives from her male co-workers is not always wanted. In fact, she was once physically chased until she almost fell off the building at the construction site. Although she describes the men as "sweet-talkers," which may indicate some level of pleasure from their attentions, she is unable to control how they would react when she rejects them. Some of the men, she said "became crazy" (*tak siuman*) after she rejected them.

Munirah's physical, as well as social boundaries – absent husband, romantically-aggressive male co-workers – were being threatened during this particular time of her life. So while it may be viewed as unfeminist because she decides to quit her job during her pregnancy, possibly to become a stay-at-home-mom (the confession does not specify if she has gone back to work), Munirah is actually reasserting control over her life. She removes herself from a workplace she does not feel comfortable in and gets her husband to become more present in their marriage, all while maintaining her position as a woman compliant to cultural and religious order. What we also see is that the physical pains she experienced during pregnancy that were ignored by her doctor, were treated by the traditional healer as a serious issue.

While the stories we have looked at so far include some kind of curative effect by the end of the story, this is not what happens all the time. In some cases, the women experience *gangguan* for a prolonged period with no cure. However, they continue to go for treatments,

where they can continue to communicate with the jin, and in doing so, learn to live with it. Such is the case with Nurul, a 23-year-old woman who wrote the confession titled *Aku dan Jin Asyik* (nurul, 2017). Her gangguan began when she reached puberty at age 11. Some of her symptoms included seeing dark figures and pontianak⁴³ watching her while she was in bed; having dreams about sex, being pregnant and giving birth, as well as dreams in which she is nursing a baby⁴⁴; dreams of snakes and bodies of water (most of them dirty); bruises, body pains and lethargy.

Although her symptoms might imply that she may have been experiencing actual rape, she does not give any indication of this in the story. She does not mention any other male relative except her brother – who had died before her gangguan began – and her father. When her father was sick with cancer, she was the one who brought him to see a bomoh, and then later a “proper” traditional healer i.e., an uztaz, who practiced healing according to Islamic law (instead of the bomoh). When her gangguan began, she also spoke to both parents about it. There are other confessions on the website that detail actual rape – including repeated rape from adolescence until adulthood – without reference to the supernatural and so, I have no reason to assume that she was actually being raped, especially because dreams of sex are a very common symptom of jin gangguan.⁴⁵ Based on the rest of the story, it seems as if it is a manifestation of something else.

When her gangguan started, her parents were looking after their three-year-old grandchild because Nurul’s eldest brother and his wife had died. Nurul is the youngest child and considering the fact that she has a niece/nephew who is only eight years younger than

⁴³ She described the pontianak figure as having long hair and dressed in a torn, white robe.

⁴⁴ In these dreams, the baby is usually a corpse or has an odd body e.g., a big and squished head, or with tiny eyes and a death-like smell.

⁴⁵ If the list of symptoms include sex dreams, healers would typically say that the type of jin involved is a jin asyik, who is in love with the patient or might be using the patient’s body as a channel to have sexual intercourse with another jin.

herself, it seems as if there is a large age gap between her and her siblings. This three-year-old child was sickly and so, Nurul's parents sought treatment from a bomoh. Nurul followed them to the bomoh for three years, which she said was a mistake. In her confession, she wrote that she could not understand why her parents would employ the services of a bomoh but because she was too young, she was not able to reprimand them. After Nurul's niece/nephew died, the gangguan ceased for some time. It only resumed again three years later when Nurul turned twenty (the same age Lily in the first story began to experience gangguan) and her father was found to be sick with cancer.

Nurul is at liminal phases each time the gangguan begins – first as an adolescent and then later as a young woman of marriageable age. The first gangguan takes place when Nurul reaches puberty, which is usually a time when a girl – with childhood innocence – becomes a woman who can now be “associated with abject fecundity” (Ussher, 2006, p. 18). Her body is also changing in ways that she cannot control – her breasts grow, pubic hair develops, her skin becomes oily, her hips and thighs change shape, and she starts to menstruate (Ussher, 2006). While this is taking place, Nurul plays second fiddle to her brother's sick child when it comes to her parents' attention. Even when she goes to see the bomoh for treatment, it is not something she has a choice over. She is simply following her mother, who is seeking treatment for the child and tells Nurul that “since we are here, you can get treated too.” Nurul says the bomoh worsened her gangguan.

At twenty, when the gangguan starts again, Nurul's father is the one who is sick with cancer. Her parents start seeking treatment from a bomoh again. Nurul is responsible for taking her father for treatment. Eventually, she says that she felt she was old enough to reprimand her parents. She asks them to stop seeing the bomoh and manages to convince her family to see an uztaz for treatment instead. In the story she specifies that she is the youngest child, who is not even 22 yet, but she is the one who has to advise her parents to see a proper

healer. She describes her process of advising her parents as “slow talk,” which indicates that it took a while to convince them. Her efforts are eventually successful and through talking with the uztaz, she learns more about what is haunting her. The uztaz also teaches her ways to set up protections (*pendinding*) in her home, as well as her body – by saying prayers. However, she says she continues to suffer from gangguan possibly because her family “does not keep the faith properly” (*tak jaga iman sebaiknya*) – meaning that they do not maintain proper Islamic practices. In a way, Nurul is a girl who had to grow up too fast. As a young, unmarried woman, she is supposedly a junior member of the family, who is not supposed to take charge the way she has. Although she does not find a cure for her gangguan in her story and continues to live with a family who does not meet her expectations, she is able to use the gangguan as a way to express her displeasure. She can continue to “slow talk” to them, even as the youngest member of the family. Although she is not in control, through the gangguan, she is still able to have a voice and make demands.

Conclusion

The ideal female body is a concept that only exists in the Symbolic, which is made up of discourse and language (Morris, 2020). Within this structure, the non-ideal female body that is considered dangerous requires containment and control – by society at large, as well as by women themselves (Ussher, 2006). When uncontrollable, the female body and its other excesses is seen as abject and monstrous. In Malay women, this monstrousness manifests in the form of supernatural gangguan (disturbance) by hantu and jin, which are recognisable signifiers in the local Malaysian (patriarchal) Symbolic order.⁴⁶ Treatment of these gangguan

⁴⁶ In more science-based societies, monstrousness might manifest in more technological forms. Haraway (1987) wrote about the “cyborg monster” and how it challenges the idea of a global gender identity (p. 99). This fusion between human and machine sparks a deeper consideration of how sex and sexual embodiment can be partial and fluid.

at healing centres involve summoning the spirits that are harassing the women, then talking to them (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1999). Often, the spirits speak through the woman i.e., she speaks to the healer, but it is seen as the spirits speaking. Thus, there is communication between the Symbolic and the Real. By sharing stories of their oppression on confession pages, these women become part of a community that reciprocates with advice, comfort and solidarity. At the same time, the confessions show how *gangguan* allows them to align themselves with religious and sociocultural order. So, despite existing controls, Malay women are able to use *gangguan* to confront what is horrifying about their bodies and lives, talk to the monster, and assert individual control over their particular situation, while maintaining their alignment with the Malay(sian) Symbolic order.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation is set in modernity as it is associated with capitalism. However, Friedman (2015) writes about “recurrent modernities” that develop multidirectionally through encounters with other civilisations and societies (p. 62). So while this dissertation has contrasted Malay female empowerment with the more Western-influenced feminist and sexuality projects, it has not delved into instances of female empowerment in Western or other non-Western cultures, which may have also influenced local Malay culture. What this dissertation has shown is that Malay women in Malaysia are empowered through strategies that are not typically feminist in that they do not assume the subordination of women and thus, do not need to aim for emancipation. My research looked at sex and gendered media across a range of Internet platforms, focusing particularly on Malay sexual discourse and how the female body is represented online. Each chapter explained the Malay woman’s body according to Lacan’s three registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real.

Chapter 1 focused on the Imaginary body, exploring how despite the societal ideal of what a Malay Muslim woman should be – veiled and modest – Malay women are able to use this image to increase their seductive powers and assert their subjectivity even in a medium as controversial as pornography. Without revealing their bodies, Malay women are able to produce a kind of pornography that stimulates arousal but does not transgress religious or social boundaries. Chapter 2 looked at the Symbolic body, focusing on the link between the penis and the phallus as a symbol of authority. This chapter showed that the erect penis, which is often equated to male strength and virility, is not simply a display of masculinity. Rather, its main purpose is to answer to female desire. What Chapters 1 and 2 show is that power in the Malay context does not solely belong to men – it continues to be shared and struggled over. Chapter 3 focuses more on this struggle as it touches on the female body that

has been excluded from general discourse, which situates it in the Real. This abjectness of the female body manifests as *gangguan*, afflictions said to be caused by supernatural creatures such as *jin*. Women with these afflictions seek help at traditional healing centres where treatments involve talking to the *jin*, discovering its desires and negotiating with it. This chapter showed that even when women are not in control of their situations and bodies, they are able to assert authority through other methods. Ultimately, this dissertation shows that in Malaysia, there is still a power struggle between genders that does not take the form of political movements or conscious resistance, and in which women are not entirely subordinate.

Feminism has been useful for highlighting the many sexual, economic and social injustices done to women (Halley, 2008). However, feminism is not the only theory on power and there are perhaps, better alternatives that can be applied to the Malay – and Southeast Asian – situation. Berlant (1988) writes that the “social construction of female marginality” is more complex than other kinds of marginalisation because women are expected to live with and desire men (p. 238). This complex marginalisation also applies to Asian men who are often positioned as feminine in the global Symbolic (Song & Velding, 2020). Although they may not desire other men, they too live in and have to gain recognition from systems influenced by Western hegemony. However, hegemony is not permanent. Hall (1997) uses Foucault and Gramsci’s theories on power to say that power circulates through “knowledge, representation, ideas, cultural leadership and authority, as well as economic constraint and physical coercion” (p. 261). The Internet, which is now an integrated part of human life, has changed the dynamics of representation and transformed society in fundamental ways (Consalvo, 2011). With the wider range of representation on the Internet, questions on Southeast Asian gender, as well as how it is expressed and recognised globally would be interesting to answer and explore further.

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