

# Identity Construction of Malaysian Indian Transgenders

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the issues of identity construction of life stories of eight adult Indian transgenders who are staying in Malaysia. It aims to examine how transgenders construct their self-identity as to reveal their beliefs and identities according to their life styles through their social discourses. This research helps the readers to think wisely by accepting the transgenders as who they are without need to isolate them because of their genders.

Keywords: Identity, transgender people, face; language use; social deixis, Social Identity theory

## Introduction

Transgender is the key term for the people who do not match the original sex to which they were born and may be identified as "bigender". Many categories coincide in transgender identity such as; transvestite; androgynes; cross-dresser; genderqueer; drag kings; and drag queens; and transsexual. Moreover, sexual identity development is very important because it is not possible to change their genders during their childhood as they are not matured enough to take decision but it is a different situation when they have grown up. They could make up their own minds to change their sexual identities as they wish (Calvert, 2002).

Transgender people are not recognized by most religions, societies, and cultures. They are generally unacceptable by heterosexuals because transgenders have their own beliefs about their religion and cultures and it might be similar or different from heterosexuals. Most of the heterosexuals could not accept the genders other than male and female. In Malaysia, society labels the transgender people as abnormal people (Teh, 1998: 169). According to PT Foundation (Pink Triangle Sdn Bhd), the number of transgender people has increased over the years with an estimated 20 000 to 30 000 transgender people in Malaysia in 2012. On the other hand, according to Teh (1998), Dr. Chow who is a Consultant Physician said in a forum on Sexual and Reproductive Health & Rights (SRHR), that there was no actual data or estimates of transgender people available in Malaysia. This study is almost entirely based on purposive sampling (that is participants enroll from social service agencies, temples, and streets).

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Prejudice and discrimination upon the transgender people, transvestites or transsexuals does not seem to have been eradicated or contained in fact it is widespread in the country. The forum on transgender (TG) community on Sexual and Reproductive Health & Rights (SRHR) was an initiative by a group of concerned citizens aimed at highlighting the transgender people's life in Malaysia. Transgenders are happy in their own world. They have their own community and they do pray like other Hindus. Unfortunately, there is a lack of studies on Malaysia Indian transgenders in the field of pragmatics, except for a few newspapers and magazine articles related to Indian transgenders discussed here. The researcher is focusing only on MTF (Transwoman). MTF is a commonly used abbreviation for male to female transgenders.

Indian transgender communities are very dedicated to their religion. It had been proved through the observation by the researcher when she went to the temple that belongs to transgenders' community in Pandamaran, Klang. Transgenders are very strict in fasting and clothing especially during festivals. The transgender community owns their own temple in Shankhalpoor in Gujarat, India and it is the main temple in Asia. There is also a temple for Indian transgender people in Pandamaran, Klang because there are many Indian transgender people in Malaysia. There was an article about transgender people on 24th July 2007, written by Wani Muthiah. The topic of the article was, "Devotees from Malaysia and Singapore fulfill vows to deity for transsexuals". The article described about the five-days celebrations devoted to the Hindu presiding deity, Goddess Bahuchara Mataji, by transgenders. There were 400 participants from Malaysia and Singapore who attended the ceremony in Pandamaran temple and devotees fulfilled their vows in the temple ceremony by carrying *paalkudam* (milk pots) and *thee chatti* (earthen pots with fire).

Unfortunately, transgender community had lost an Icon who was fondly called as "*Asha Anima*" (Mother Asha) or the "Indian godmother of Chow Kit". She passed away on Tuesday, 7<sup>th</sup> August 2012 from a heart attack at the age of 68 and she was the oldest transgender woman in Malaysia. She had undergone a sex change operation in her early 20s and Asha received her Malaysian identification card as a woman at the age of 29. Asha, whose husband died 14 years ago, had made a living by running a small restaurant near Chow Kit. According to someone who knew her, Asha was respected by many transgender people as she had helped them to acquire new identification cards as women and counseled many people who wanted to undergo sex change operations.

### Limitation of the Study

The research is limited only to eight Indian transgenders who are Hindus merely to analyze the construction of identity through the use of social deixis and rapport between themselves and others. The result of this study does not represent the identity construction of the whole Indian transgenders in Malaysia. Moreover, the researcher also went through lots of challenges and obstacles while collecting the data. Before the transgenders allowed the researcher to interview them, the transgenders had stated few rules that the researcher had to follow. For instance, the researcher was forced to make up, answer their questions and also the transgenders requested the researcher to address them using a female pronoun. The researcher could not find

more participants due to certain issues such as some of the Indian transgenders were not comfortable to reveal their real identity, they have been cheated by other researchers before, and they dislike being the highlighted issue as they wanted to live a peaceful life like heterosexuals. Furthermore, since this study is forbidden and private, the information collected through the semi-structured interviews may have some constrictions due to the possibilities that the participants might feel leery and afraid to reveal in-detail about their feelings and life styles to the researcher where they scared that the information's might be misused.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is very important because it will help to reveal the problems faced by transgenders through their social discourse. It also will help the heterosexuals to explore the reasons behind their situations and will make the heterosexuals to think wisely by accepting the transgenders as who they are without need to isolate them because of their genders. Heterosexuals will realize the truth that, the transgenders' language which focusing mainly on their language referential is similar like heterosexuals which does not mean that they are different in terms of language, even though they are in their identities. A chance should be given to anyone without focusing on their genders if they are good in studies and have good talents. Job opportunities should be reconsidered by taking in-account the transgenders and heterosexuals. Through this research, heterosexuals should try to understand that the transgenders are not mean people and we should not discriminate them. Practically, it is expected that it would be useful for journalists/writers, readers of this research to know deeply about social deixis which are found in the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews. In addition, this study is expected to give contribution and information for other researches who want to conduct research in the same field of this study. This whole study possibly will be a medium for a better communication and understanding between the neglected transgenders and the governing society.

### **Background Description of Research Subjects**

Through the findings of the questionnaires and semi-structured interview, it is confirmed that all of the subjects met the criteria for being transgenders who describes about their 'new' identity through the use of their social deixis.

The crucial part to take in account here is all the participants display some female-like mannerism in their characteristics such as the way they walked and their gestures during their interview sections except for Participants 6 and 8. All of the participants considered themselves as transgenders as they were attracted to and had sexual relationship with male partners except for Participant 3 who is not interested to have sexual relationship with anyone. Table 1.1 describes briefly the demographic information about the prime subjects of this study.

All of the subjects are Malaysian Indians and they were born and brought up in Malaysia. Five of them are transvestites and three of them are transsexuals. There is a difference between transsexual and transvestites who simply covered themselves with the outfit of an opposite sex.

Table 1.1: Information about the Transgenders

Samples (T)	Age on 2013	Occupations	Marital status	Level of Education	Transvestite/ Transsexual	Age of realization of their gender	Acquired Languages
P	33	working in flower shop	Have boyfriend	Form 5	Transsexual	13 years old	Malay, Tamil and English
K	21	bridal and tying flowers and prostitution	Have boyfriend	Form 2	Transsexual	secondary school	N/A
S	21	cashier in supermarket	Single	Form 5	Transvestite	13 years old	Malay, Tamil and English
N	19	not working	Coupled	Form 5	Transvestite	11 years old	N/A
R1	23	Waitress	Coupled	Form 3	Transvestite	11 years old	N/A
R2	30	working in saloon	Married	Form 4	Transvestite	14 years old	Malay and Tamil
M	26	working in saloon	Coupled	Form 5	Transsexual	12 years old	Malay and Tamil
A	29	not working	Married	Standard 6	Transvestite	12 years old	Malay and Tamil

According to Dietert (2007), the decision to modify the body may depend on the individual's gender identity or, more importantly, the individual's gender expression. Two subjects (R2 and M) are working in Saloon, P is working in a flower shop, R1 is a waiter, S is a cashier in a supermarket, N and A are not working and lastly K is a prostitute and also working as a bridal and tying flowers during her free time. From the table, it was found that four of the transgender people did not completed their studies while the other four people completed their secondary school. P, S, and M did not further their studies after finish their SPM examination. According to their interview conversation, they did not further their studies because they were discriminated when they were applying for their further education. N is waiting for her SPM result and she is pretty sure that she will be getting a good result and will further her education in University. On the other hand, K, R1, R2 and A were not interested to continue their studies because they were insulted badly during their school days so they stopped schooling and moreover, they were not interested to study.

Based on the subjects' language acquisition, only two transgender people who were known as P and S were trilingual people. They can speak Malay, English and Tamil languages. While, the other three (R2, M and A) were bilinguals which they can only speak Malay and Tamil languages. Even though K, N and R1 did not state their language preferences, the researcher able to find out through the interview

conversation that N can speak good English, Malay and Tamil languages while K and R1 could not speak English. They only spoke in Malay and Tamil languages during the interview. It is proved that all the subjects are native speakers of Tamil language; and they use Malay language as their second language as they are Malaysian citizen. Even though not all of them are highly educated, but they managed to speak Malay language with non-Indians to survive in their daily life such as communicating in Malay language when buying chicken from hawker and so on. Ever since these subjects are bilinguals and trilingual, they employed code-switching in most of their speech in the conversations. For instance, Participant 4 (N) used code-switching in English and Tamil in her conversation. She said "*competition vanthu..normal la kuil la pooti veppangala, athuku pooti vechangana nan poi kalanthukuven*". She meant that "normally in temple, they will organize a competition, I will go and participate." This was mainly because of all the subjects were not highly educated, they could not find a correct grammar or vocabulary when they are communicating with others.

Besides, Huston (1983) said that gender role is important in the growing stage during teenage years that involves sexual identity. All of the transgender people are stressful about their assigned sex at birth that they are expected to follow by their parents and family. According to the questionnaires and interviews, all of the transgender people realized their changes in their gender roles before the age of 15. They were very stress because they were too young when they realized their changes in their identity and it was agreed by Grotevant (1998) that transgender people could not share their feelings to anyone including their families and friends. R2 realized the changes on her at the age of 14, P and S realized their changes at the age of 13, M and A realized at the age of 12, and K realized during her secondary school but she did not state the exact age. Only, two transgender people (N and R1) realized during their primary school, at the age of 12. Some of the transgender people were very lucky because their family accepted them as what they are. Parker and Barr (1984) said that notifying parents about transgender identity is necessary and this was supported by Bolin (1988) and also Sapora and Brzek (1983) who said that parents play a crucial role in attaining a sense of self-acceptance by transgender people. But, some parents avoided their children because they could not accept the fact that their children had changed their identity.

## A Brief Description on Participants

### *Participant 1: Transsexual*

Her name is P. She is working in a flower shop for 5 years in Kulim. She studied until Form 5 in Sekolah Menengah Lunas. P's parents had passed away when she was in Standard 5. She has 4 siblings. P is in love with Thiru for the past 8 years and plans to get married in 2013. Sewing is her hobby and her favorite things are teddy bears and flowers. P's godmother is A where she was the one who guided her to become a transvestite after P told her about her changes at the age of 13. P also has a godchild whose age is 18 years old. P had undergone sex change operation in Thailand. P does not mind if anyone teases her. She had never involved in any bad things and also do not have any bad habits. P had been crowned as Miss. Kulim in the year 2010. Her aim is to own a flower shop. Her requests to the heterosexuals are that do not talk badly about transgender and appeals to the government to recognize transgender identities especially after they have gone through sex-change operation.

***Participant 2: Transsexual***

Her name is K and she was born in 1992 and brought up in Taiping, Perak. K has a boyfriend, Murugan who is working as a lorry driver. K can communicate in 3 languages which are Malay, Tamil and English. She has 5 siblings and her father is working as a guard while her mother is not working due to her sickness. She studied till Form 2 because her family could not afford to support her and she also has no interest in studying because her friends in the school were teasing her. She earns money from bridal and selling flowers which she considers it as part time job where her main job is prostitution. She had undergone sex change operation in Thailand. K got to know her boyfriend as her customer at first. Her hobby is to watch Tamil drama serials in television and hangs out with her boyfriend. Her girlfriends do not like to mingle with her and avoided her without reasons. K has drinking habits where some of her customers will ask her to drink with them. Now, she is staying together with her boyfriend after fought with her family. They have never bothered about her till now. Since small, K used to wear girl's attire and realized her changes when she was in secondary school. Her advice to the people who are like her is, not to be sad and trust in their ownself. Her wish is to heterosexuals are to mingle with transgender people and Government should recognize their identity.

***Participant 3: Transvestite***

Her name is S and she was born is Klang in 1992 and lives there till now. S does not have boyfriend since she has no interest to have one. She is working as a cashier in a supermarket after form 5 because she wants to save money for sex change operation. Her hobbies are watching television and talking to others. S realized her changes when she was in form 1 and she was very scared because she was thinking that she is the only one transgender but later, she had discovered many people who are like her. Her parents supported her after consulted with a doctor regarding her changes. She has 3 siblings and S does not have any bad habits. S's future plan is to change to a female and pursue her studies after sex-change operation. Her advice to the people who are like her is not to involve in any bad things such as prostitution. She does not want heterosexuals to think badly about transgender people because they are also human beings.

***Participant 4: Transvestite***

Her name is N and she was born in 1994 and lives in Segamat, Johor. N can communicate in 3 languages which are Malay, Tamil and English. She has 3 siblings and her mother is working as a cashier in Supermarket while her father is working in a Scrap company. Currently, N stays at home and does not go to work since she plans to pursue her studies. She is a quiet type of girl. Her hobby is cooking and she has no bad habits. N has a boyfriend named Maniam where she met him in the temple during a festival. She also has a godmother, Tharchayini who lives in Kulim, Kedah. N realized her changes at the age of 11 and started to wear girl's attire when she was 12 years old. N has not undergone operation because she has no money and she is still in the progress of saving money. N's future plans are she wanted to further her studies to a higher level, then getting married and give birth. Her advice to the people who are like her is not be shy and be scared of others. She would

like heterosexuals to give respect to the transgender people and Government should understand their situation and settle their problems.

#### *Participant 5: Transvestite*

Her name is R1 and she was born in Kuala Lumpur on 1983 and lives there till now. She is the only son for her parents but they had passed away. R1 has a boyfriend who owns beauty parlor in Midvale and he is taking care of R1 besides her friend Laxmi and her relatives. R1 is working in a restaurant. She studied till Form 3. When she was 11 years old, her behavior had fully changed to a girl. She not yet undergo operation because does not have enough money. R1 has bad habits such as smoking and drinking. Her hobbies are cooking, watching television, or goes out with her boyfriend. She felt that born as transgender is disadvantage because people are keep on teasing her wherever she goes. Anyhow, her advice to transgender people is not to be sad and live happily with the life given by God. Her wish to heterosexuals is to treat them like normal and do not irritate them.

#### *Participant 6: Transvestite*

Her name is R2 and she is 21 years old. She was born in Bukit Mertajam, Penang and now working in saloon which is located in Kulim. She has 3 siblings and her mother is working as waitress while her father could not work after met with an accident. R2 can communicate in 2 languages which is Malay and Tamil. R2 is married with Agilan in 2009 and they are live together but she hasn't gone through sex-operation and she is planning to do it in Thailand after have enough money. She likes to do house work during her free time and her favorite food is homemade food. She studied until form 4 because had no interest in studies. Since small, R2 has been brought up by wearing girls' attire. R2's godmother is A where she was the one guided her to become a transvestite after R2 told about her changes at the age of 14. She will not get angry if anyone snaps her pictures with or without her knowledge. Her aim is to go for sex-change operation as soon as possible.

#### *Participant 7: Transsexual*

Her name is M and she is 25 years old. She lives in Seberang Jaya, Penang and works in Divya Hair Saloon in Butterworth. She has 3 siblings and her mother is working as a promoter in Pacific Mall, Penang. M had gone through sex change operation in Bangkok, Thailand with her family support. M plans to get married in 2013 with her boyfriend, Saravanan who is working as a salesman. A is her godmother where she was the one guided her to become a transvestite after M told about her changes at the age of 12 and also whenever she had problems. M and her boyfriend have smoking and drinking alcohol habits. M is able to speak in two languages: Tamil and Malay. She studied till Form 5 and she ran away to Kuala Lumpur from her house when she realized her changes of her identity. M is good in cooking and her favorite food is chicken chop. She likes teddy bears, wears silver jewelries and watches cartoons on her free time. M had been bullied when she was living in a flat but she did not do anything to them and just surrender to God about her problems. Every year, M will be joining the transgender festival that will be organized in Pandamaran temple,

Klang. Her advices to heterosexuals are not to tease people like her if they could not understand them.

### *Participant 8: Transvestite*

Her name is A and she is 27 years old and stays in Butterworth. A has 4 siblings. Currently, A is not working because taking care of her parents. She has seven god children. She studied until Standard 6. A married with Subramaniam who's working as a guard but both of them are not living together but will meet up daily because A is taking care of her sick father. She knows only two languages: Tamil and Malay. A told that she is having a different feeling since small but not yet undergo sex-change operation because of her father's condition. A had started to wear woman's clothes since 12 years old. Nowadays, she used to wear saree whenever she goes out with her husband. A is good in cooking and she spends her free time by talking to her friends. She also smokes and drinks alcohol but her husband does not mind about it. She will not get angry if anyone snaps her pictures without or with her knowledge. She wants people to try to understand, accept and behave normal to the transgender people.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation for Further Studies**

At the time of this study, the construction of identities of transgender people in Malaysia is very limited in number. Even though transgender people have existed for a long time in Malaysian society, they are not recognized in Malaysia and transgender activities have been carried out secretly. In this research, the number of participants interviewed by the researcher is quite small. Thus, suggestion given by the researcher is to involve a large number of participants so that the findings can be generalized to the whole Indian transgender community in Malaysia. Intricate a large number of participants in the study would be fascinating and informative if conducted.

Results of this study suggest that transgender people have developed a rather similar style of language and speech patterns through their adaptation of certain women's linguistic features in their spoken discourse. Findings in this study revealed that the transgender people had constructed their identity through their language use. In relation to this, the researcher would strongly recommend future studies to be conducted in discovering the similarities on linguistic practices between trans men and trans women. As previously stated in Section 1.5, future research in language and gender field should be geared up on analyzing the possible similarities of certain linguistic features shared by men and women.

Lastly, more studies need to be done to find out the factors that determine the linguistic choice of spoken language among transgender people. In this study, the factors that affected the linguistic choice among transgender people relied on two other studies conducted in sociology and gender studies. In order to increase the reliability and validity of the research instrument, particularly the survey, more pilot studies on other factors such as consumption behaviour as well as leisure and interests which may affect the choice of linguistic patterns and styles of transgender people need to be carried out in the future.



Most of the participants have encompassed their Hinduism beliefs in their narrations of their life stories, therefore constructing themselves as Indians. There are many occurrences in their narratives in which they exposed that their Indian values and ideology were not absolutely unrestrained; in fact they were still affected by them to a certain extent. Despite they describe their lives as happy lifestyles; they experienced internal struggles between continuing the lifestyle of a transgender and conforming to the Indian culture. While many of the transgender people in India are fighting for the same rights as the heterosexual, such as the legal right to marry another transgender. They are requesting so that heterosexuals treat them fairly and recognize them as what they are.

## Reflections

There were many challenges and obstacles that the researcher faced starting with the review of literature on transgenders' subject throughout her experiences conducting this study. Even though there were many existing studies pertaining to transgender in other fields such as psychology, sociology, and gender studies, the researcher found that there was no previous attempt to describe the language of Indian transgender people in Malaysia. This was the biggest challenge for the researcher as she had to bridge the gap between the available literature on transgender from other fields and the existing literature on language and gender studies. Besides, the researcher encountered a hard time collecting the data with the participants involved in this study, especially during the prayers time. It decelerated the researcher's progress in collecting the data because she had to wait for some time for them to be more at ease with each other before she could resume the research again. Finally, the process of transcribing the subjects' conversations took longer than the researcher thought. As a result, it hampered the researcher's progress in completing this dissertation according to her study plan. Nevertheless, the researcher is truly glad that she is making a contribution in a field close to her heart. She wants the heterosexual community to accept the transgender people as what they are and not to discriminate them as they also have feelings like us.

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**Online Newspaper article**

24th July 2007, "Devotees from Malaysia and Singapore fulfill vows to deity for transsexuals" by Wani Muthiah.

Inspired by the same problematising stance on gender variance, politicians in one part of the country have proposed a programme of forced rehabilitation for 'cross-dressers' (New Straits Times, 2007).

13th October 2011, "The Strange Treatment of Trans People in Malaysia's Media" by Paul Canning

24th September 2012, "The Indian perspective about the issue of Transsexualism" by Valan.

25th October 2012, "We have no standing in society" by Mohit M.Rao.