Malaysian Queer Literature

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Malaysian queer literature (MQL) in terms of what it is, its characteristic elements, and how the way it is written responds to the differential treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) people in Malaysia. The article uses the secondary data analysis method to examine existing resources on MQL to ascertain what it is, its origin, and evolution. The article then applies the analytical method developed by Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth to examine the elements of MQL in Malaysia's anthologies of queer literature, namely, *Body 2 Body - A Malaysian Queer Anthology* (2009) and *Mata Hati Kita/The Eyes of Our Hearts* (2016). The analysis reveals that MQL is a new literary genre in the Malaysian literary scene and is produced for a number of reasons including to open up avenues of discussion about queer that remains subject to condemnation by the mainstream local society. Two characteristic elements of MQL are identified, namely, the multiple conceptions of sexual and gender identities, and the disruption of sexual and gender norms. The analysis also reveals that MQL is written with these elements in mind as a way to respond to the discriminatory treatment of LGBTQ people in the country. The article has implications for current efforts that seek to use MQL not only to provide readers with the diverse ways of being in the world but also to rethink existing discourses that continue to condemn LGBTQ people on the basis of gender and sexual diversity.

Keywords: queer; LGBTQ; gender; sexuality; literature; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Literature is such an important part of our lives, not simply because it is used to portray human life and experience, but also because of the 'reality' and 'truth' that it seeks to represent. This is especially true if we consider, for instance, Ryken's (1984) contention on how literature works to portray life, human experience, reality, and truth. Literature, as Ryken (1984) posits:

> . . .is concrete and experiential. It uses tangible images to convey the very quality of lived experience. It appeals to our imagination (image-making capacity). . .the subject of literature is human experience - not abstract ideas or propositions, but experience. The knowledge or truth that literature gives us is an awareness of reality or truth as it is actually experienced. (p. 17)

Queer literature functions much in the same way as Ryken's definition, particularly how it portrays the lived experiences and realities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) people. To illustrate this point, we use contemporary LGBTQ literature of the United States as an example. This literary genre addresses a wide range of topics including LGBTQ history and culture, identity politics, and AIDS advocacy, with the aim to enable readers who identify as LGBTQ to "give context and meaning to their experiences" and provide non-identifying LGBTQ readers "insight into experiences and cultures they only barely understand and

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might not understand at all" (Nelson, 2009, p. xxx). But queer literature is not limited to this function alone. Scholars such as Lin (2014) argue that the term queer literature not only refers to "the body of literature that includes the great diversity of LGBTQ characters, narratives, and themes" but also texts that are written in a way that allows readers to rethink dominant concepts of gender and sexuality. This can be seen in, for example, the various ways readers may respond to the portrayal of gender diverse or gender non-conforming characters whose gender appearances, behaviours, and identities do not align with their birth-assigned sex or conform to the gender binary system.

The same can be said of Malaysian queer literature (hereafter MQL) which has been in existence since the 1990s (I shall return to this point shortly). Despite the diversity of opinions and attitudes about LGBTQ people in the country (Luhur, Brown, & Goh, 2020; Ng, Yee, Subramaniam, Loh, & Moreira, 2015, Kar, Kai, & Zien, 2021), MQL survives and continues to thrive in the local literary scene for a variety of reasons including to provide the public insights into the lived experiences of LGBTQ people in the country and the realities of growing up in a society that rejects 'deviant' or 'abnormal' forms of sexuality and gender. Furthermore, the continued presence of MQL in the local literary landscape is also attributed to the writers themselves who, among others, seek to tell stories about queer lives as a way of responding to the disparaging treatment of LGBTQ people by the mainstream local society. The present article seeks to add to the existing research on MQL by answering three key questions: (1) What is MQL? (2) What are its characteristic elements? and (3) How does MQL respond to the differential treatment of LGBTQ people in Malaysia?

Before proceeding further, it will be helpful to explain how this article is organized and how it uses the terms "queer" and "queerness". The article begins with a brief review of research relating to MQL, followed by a description of the methodology. The article then discusses MQL, with a focus on what it is, its origin, and evolution. This is then followed by a discussion of the characteristic elements of MQL in two Malaysian queer anthologies, namely, *Body 2 Body* (Kugan & Pang 2009) and *Mata Hati Kita*/*The Eyes of Our Hearts* (Kuga Thas & Kee, 2016). To provide a more focused analysis of these elements, the article examines two short stories from the anthologies: "Monsoon Massage" (GnanaSelvam, 2009) from *Body 2 Body,* and "I Am Not Gay" by an anonymous author (*I am Not Gay,* 2016) from *Mata Hati Kita*/*The Eyes of Our Hearts*. The main goal is to explore what makes these stories and MQL "queer". The article concludes with a discussion on how MQL is written in a way that responds to the discriminatory treatment of LGBTQ people in present-day Malaysia.

The terms "queer" and "queerness" in this article follows Alexander Doty's use of the same terms that refer to either "gay, lesbian, or bisexual, any non-normative expression of gender, including those connected with straightness, and non-straight things that are not clearly marked as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or transgendered, but that seem to suggest or allude to one or more of these categories, often in a vague, confusing, or incoherent manner" (cited in Bruzzi, 2013, p. 60). The terms "queer" and "queerness" in this article also follow Rivera-Servera's (2012) use of the same terms to describe what it means "to be queer" and "to act queer" (p. 27). "To be queer" refers to the position taken up by individuals of non-normative sex/gender, and "to act queer" indicates the strategies that these individuals utilize to be queer or articulate their queerness (Rivera-Servera, 2012). Such strategies may include ways of speaking, clothing styles, and physical dispositions that are employed by some queer individuals to navigate their lives in the heteronormative world. The term "queer" in particular is used as a verb to describe the act of 'queering' that solidifies what it means to be queer and to act queer. McCann and Monaghan (2020)

contend that to undertake "queering", one needs to use "queer" as a verb that stands for the act of undermining and subverting social norms and expectations (p. 3). Queer individuals engage in the act of queering social norms governing sexuality and gender and redefine them to enact multifarious ways of being in the world. These are aligned with the key tenet of queer theory that acknowledges "the multiplicity of sexual and gender identities, which means, refusing stable identities and . . .producing new identifications that lie outside binary models of gender and sexuality" (Blackburn & Beucer, 2019, p. 24)

However, while the term "queer" and the acronym "LGBTQ" are often used to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning people, they are Western terminologies that have no equivalents in local vernaculars. Terms such as "*lelaki lembut* (soft men), *songsang* (inverted), *bapuk, ah kua, mak nyah, pak nyah* (specific forms of transgenderism) and *wanita keras* (hard women)" (Pang, 2015), in addition to "thirunangai" (i.e., a term in Tamil for transgender woman) (SUHAKAM, 2020) and "tongzhi (同志)"(i.e., a Chinese term for individuals who are attracted to the same sex)(Tan, 2022) are often used to describe individuals whose gender and sexuality exist outside the heteronormative sex and gender binaries. The term *mak nyah* in particular was specifically coined to replace *pondan* which has long been a pejorative term used by the larger heteronormative Malay society to condemn Malay *mak nyah* and *pondan* (effeminate) Malay men for being *kewanitaan* (womanly) and *tidak jantan* (unmanly)(Jerome, 2013b). The self-identified Malay *mak nyah*, Khartini Slamah (2005), contends:

> The term 'mak nyah', which derives from mak (mother), was coined in 1987 by Malaysia's male transsexuals in an attempt to define ourselves. Our attempt at self-definition emerged from two streams: first, a desire to differentiate ourselves from gay men, transvestites, cross-dressers, drag queens and other 'sexual minorities', with whom all those who are not heterosexual are automatically lumped; and second, because we also wanted to define ourselves from a vantage point of dignity rather than from the position of derogation in which Malaysian society had located us, with names such as *bapok, darai, pondan*, and *bantut*, all of which mean 'men who are effeminate'. (p. 99)

There are also individuals (e.g., heterosexual men in particular) who do not employ specific terms to describe their sexual attraction towards transsexuals and/or feminized gay men (Lim, 2015) - an oberservable fact that demonstrates "the vague, fluid and unbounded ways many Malaysians view the myriad manifestations of non-normative gender and sexual expression" (Pang, 2015, p. 362).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing body of research examining MQL that have opened up avenues of discussion about LGBTQ people in Malaysia. Scholars such as Khoo (2006), Tope (2010), and Che Dan (2010) examined queer characters in local fictions written by Karim Raslan and Dina Zaman. The story 'Go East!" by Karim Raslan (1996), for instance, tackles the deception and denial of the male protagonist, Mahmud, who "is only able to deal with his homosexual tendencies after leaving his hometown in Peninsular Malaysia to work in Lahad Datu, Sabah, where he has a sexual encounter with Anton, a Filipino manservant" (Che Dan, 2012, p. 143). Karim Raslan's other story, "Neighbours" (1996), centres around "the nosy Datin Sarina, who sees her new neighbour (a model of male perfection) having a sexual intercourse with a *pondan* (transvestite)" (Che Dan, 2012, p. 143). Queerness is also evidenced in Dina Zaman's story, "Two Men" (1997), that follows a chance meeting between a male taxi driver and a male tourist that led to a sexual relationship (Che

Dan, 2012). These stories, as the scholars argued, were not written to sensationalise queer desires, behaviours, and relations. Rather, they were written with the aim to allow readers and the general public to rethink the repression of sexual diversity by the mainstream local society (Khoo, 2009). This is because the sexualities presented in the works of Karim Raslan and Dina Zaman challenge the prescribed and acceptable notions of sex within the local culture that "must be conjugal, procreative, and heterosexual" (Tope, 2010, p. 108). Jerome (2013a, 2013b) extended the studies by Khoo, Tope, and Che Dan by examining identity formation process among queer characters in Karim Raslan and Dina Zaman's fictions. Using the theories and research relating to ethnic, racial, and sexual identity, Jerome (2013a, 2013b) analyzed how these queer characters constructed their sense of Malay identity marked by queerness. The analysis revealed that identity formation among the queer characters is a complex process where various factors intersect and inflect upon each other. What it means to be Malay for these queer characters is not only articulated through normative markers of Malayness (e.g., Malay culture and religion), but also through a variety of factors including queer sexualities (Jerome, 2013a, 2013b). This notion of being Malay, as Jerome (2013a, 2013b) argued, redefines dominant conceptions of Malay identity in Malaysia that is formulated and sustained through Malay culture and religion, as well as the normative expectations of gender and sexuality.

Other studies worthy of mention here include those by Razali, Noor, and Talif (2015), and Tuan Ibrahim and Abdul Latiff (2018). Razali et al. (2015) investigated queer characters in selected fictions from "Body 2 Body - A Malaysian Queer Anthology", with a focus on examining the characters' turning points to "gaydom", that is, becoming a queer individual. Using Freud's psychoanalysis theory, Razali et al. (2015) analyzed these turning points in the construction of the characters' sexual identities and determined the presence of Id, Ego, and Superego throughout the process. The findings revealed that the turnings points to "gaydom" took place at several junctures in the characters' lives, which were indicated by the presence of their Id (e.g., their sexual desires for members of the same sex or gender), Ego (e.g., the awareness of their sexual or gender identities that led them to act accordingly and rationally), and Superego (e.g., their feelings of guilt because their sexual or gender identities do not conform to sexual or gender norms)(Razali et al., 2015). Tuan Ibrahim and Abdul Latiff (2018) extended the study on "Body 2 Body - A Malaysian Queer Anthology" further by analyzing the language used by the authors to portray their queer characters. Using Systemic Functional Linguistic framework with a focus on the Attitude dimension (i.e., explaining the processes through which people express their evaluations of/towards others and/or their feelings/emotions), the study investigated whether the authors' portrayal of queer characters challenged or reinforced the stereotypical views about LGBTQ people in Malaysia. The findings revealed that most queer characters were portrayed as insecure individuals. This was evidenced by the authors' description of the characters' feelings of insecurity about their appearances and the way the society viewed their sexuality (Tuan Ibrahim & Abdul Latiff, 2018). The findings further revealed that many queer characters were evaluated by the authors in terms of their sense of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Some of the characters expressed happiness over their feelings towards the persons of their desire or the recollection of happy moments with their former lovers or partners (Tuan Ibrahim & Abdul Latiff, 2018). Other characters expressed their dissatisfaction over the way they were disparagingly treated by the society because of their sexual orientation and affectional preference, in addition to their inability to embrace their sexuality and their struggle to cope with the loss of their loved ones (Tuan Ibrahim & Abdul Latiff, 2018). The above-mentioned studies have implications on our understanding of MQL, requiring us to view the queer characters more closely in terms of their complex processes

of identity formation and the authors' evaluation of them that reinforces or challenges stereotypical views of LGBTQ people. However, there is a need to develop an understanding of what MQL is and what it can offer to readers and the general public - a task to which we now turn.

METHODOLOGY

The present article uses two methods of analysis, namely, the secondary data analysis through which pre-existing sources on MQL is analysed to address the first research question (What is MQL?) and the analytical procedures developed by Blackburn et al. (2011) to answer the second research question (What are the characteristic elements of MQL?). Given the scope of this article that is to provide a more focused analysis of the elements, only two stories are analyzed:, "Monsoon Massage" (GnanaSelvam, 2009) from *Body 2 Body,* and "I Am Not Gay" by an anonymous author (*I am Not Gay,* 2016) from *Mata Hati Kita*/*The Eyes of Our Hearts*. The analytical procedures by Blackburn et al. (2011), however, requires some explanation. Blackburn et al., (2011) developed an analytical method for evaluating LGBTQ-themed books that are used by students and teachers in American schools. The purpose of the evaluation is to find out what makes these books "queer" by examining the "queer" elements they share. These elements include the multiple, variable, and conflicting conceptions of sexual and gender identities, and the disruption of normative notions of sexuality and gender. The first step in identifying these elements is to analyse the narrator. Writers of queer literature commonly use a naïve narrator to achieve an ironic effect in their works as this helps to reveal the disruption of norms about gender and sexuality. A naive narrator is:

> one who is believable and challengeable, often less sophisticated or confident, and thus, offers the reader, through her or his naive discourse, contestable view of the world. The contestability of naive narrators contributes to the multivoicedness of the narration and, we assert, to the ideological diversity and queerness of the texts. (Blackburn et al., 2011, p. 17)

The second step in identifying the "queer" elements in queer literature is to identify evidence of focalization and focalized characters. According to Blackburn et al., (2011),

> Focalization is when some part of the story, perhaps a scene, event, or character, is described through the point of view of a character, who has unique beliefs and values which shape his or her interpretation and thus the representation of the story. A character might be focalizing, that is, representing the scene, event, or character; or a character might be focalized, that is, represented through the eyes of a different character. (p. 17)

Evidence of focalization can be clearly seen in queer fiction. In order to uncover this evidence, one is required to read and analyze the whole fiction (i.e., the story's plot or as the story unfolds) to see whether the main character engages in the act of focalizing (i.e., describing a scene, an incident, or other character that displays gender or sexual diversity) or whether the character is being focalized (i.e., the main character's gender or sexual diversity is described by other characters in the story).

The next step to identify the "queer" elements in queer literature is by examining the overall organisation of the events in the LGBTQ-themed books. This involves discussing the narrative techniques such as flashbacks and foreshadowing that the writers use to present the story events. These techniques are also used by writers to reveal further the "queer" element in queer literature, that is, the disruption of norms related to time as a distinctive feature of the queer characters' lives

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(Blackburn et al., 2011). This is because the process of becoming queer does not necessarily follow a linear progression over or with time. Rather, it is an unfolding process that sees the queer characters moving back and forth between the temporal categories such as the past, the present, and the future in creating their identities.

It should be noted that although the aforementioned method is geared towards pedagogy, it can also be applied to the study of MQL. This is because the method to an extent takes its cue from the intrinsic and extrinsic approaches to literature (Wellek & Warren, 1963). First, the method entails a close examination of the intrinsic elements found in the LGBTQ-themed books such as the narrator, the character, and the plot. These elements are interpreted and discussed in accordance to the key tenet of queer theory that is to show how the characters reject sexual and gender norms to create myriad of sexual and gender identities. The same procedure is used in this article to analyse the selected fictions. This is done by examining the same elements to uncover the processes the characters go through in enacting ways of being that do not conform to social and cultural norms regulating gender and sexuality. Second, the above-discussed method also requires a close examination of the extrinsic element, namely, LGBTQ identities in the real world that have a direct influence on character portrayal in the LGBTQ-themed books The same procedure is applied in this article with an added dimension to the investigation of the characters in the selected fictions: the character portrayal enables authors and MQL in particular to respond to the discriminatory treatment of LGBTQ people in Malaysia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

MQL's ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION

Queer literature, especially in the anglophone tradition, is defined as a genre of writing that concerns itself with the distortions of sex and gender norms (Zapasnik, 2016). This literary form embodies the fundamental tenet of queer theory regarding the disruption of norms or the standards of acceptable or proper behaviour in society, particularly those related to gender and sexuality. Queer anglophone literature has been in existence for over five decades. It was developed in the United States during the activist and scholarly climate of the late 1980s, which drew public attention to the politics of sexual and gender diversity (Zapasnik, 2016). The history of queer anglophone literature has been intricately linked to and enriched by the central themes that have characterised it as an object of study over the past decades, namely, the AIDS epidemic, the non-normative representations of family, and the intersection of transgender experience and subjectivity (Zapasnik, 2016).

Compared to queer anglophone literature, MQL is a recent development. The emergence of MQL in the local literary scene in the last few decades shows a growing trend among the Malaysian public (i.e., local writers) to open up much-needed discussion about queer. This is because queer contravenes local religious and cultural norms and thus remains a sensitive subject on which public discussion is strongly discouraged (Chua, 2019; Muhammad Faiz, Wan Allef, & Zulkifli, 2019; Subir, 2019).The trend is attributed to the local writers' need to compose stories about the lives of LGBTQ people that deserve to be told because these individuals make up the very complex fabric of Malaysian society and therefore should no longer be denied a voice in the mainstream public discourse. This is attested by Kee (2016) in the introduction of Malaysia's first anthology of stories by lesbians, bisexual women, and trans people:

> This is a book of Malaysian stories. It reveals deep fragments of individual lives as they find a name that fits; an accepting gaze from their families; a space within religion, culture, and society that isn't burdened with skewed assumptions; friendships that are capable of holding when life is a little hard or broken and, quite simply, love. But it is also a book of Malaysian stories that are rarely known. They are usually folded tight into corners because to tell them is to risk being unheard. To tell them is to risk the carefully wrought closeness being unfurled into the distance of misrecognition.
>
> (Kee, 2016, p. vii)

While there are no comprehensive studies on the evolution of MQL, several scholars such as Shanon Shah (2013) and Alex Spence (2020) contend that its origins can be traced back to the 1990s and 2000s with several works produced in Malay and English that explored non-normative gender and sexuality within the local arts and entertainment scenes. According to Shanon Shah (2013), the events that helped spur the production of these works include the controversial sacking and imprisonment in 1998 of the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, on charges of sodomy and corruption. Some of these works include "the 2000 documentary *Bukak Api* (Open Fire), the 2005 film and 2006 television series *Gol & Gincu* (Goalpost & Lipstick), and the 2009 play *Air Con*" (Shanon Shah 2013, p. 278). The 1990s and 2000s also saw the publication of local literary works (mostly short fiction) that featured queer characters including Karim Raslan's "Go East" and "Neighbours" (Karim, 1996), Dina Zaman's "Philippa" and "Two Men" (Dina, 1994), Nizam Zakaria's "Nafas", "Aku Rama-Rama", "Potret" and "Seluang" (Azwan & Diana, 2010), Jerome Kugan's "Love in the Post Nicotine Age" (Kugan, 2001) and Jerome Kugan and Pang Kee Teik's *Body 2 Body: A Malaysian Queer Anthology* (Kugan & Pang, 2009). More literary works (mostly short fiction) were published during the 2010s including Malaysia's first Malay- language anthology of queer fiction, *Orang Macam Kita* by Azwan Ismail and Diana Dirani (Azwan & Diana, 2010), and its follow-up, *Kisah Orang Kita: Penulisan LGBT oleh LGBT* (Matahari Books 2018), Angela M. Kugas Thas and Jac S. M. Kee's *The Eyes of Our Hearts* (Kuga Thas & Kee, 2016), Faisal Tehrani's *Profesor* (Faisal, 2017), and Shaz Johar's *Aku* (Shaz, 2018).

Most of these works were published by local, independent publishers who took the brave step of introducing queer voices and narratives into the local literary landscape. *Body 2 Body* is Malaysia's first English-language anthology of queer fiction, featuring stories that deal with themes of breaking up, changing sex, coming out, and coming home after spending some time abroad (Kugan & Pang, 2009). The anthology was published by Matahari Books, the brainchild of Malaysia's filmmaker Amir Muhammad. Set up in 2007, Matahari Books (now an imprint of Buku Fixi) publishes contemporary Malaysian writing in English and Malay. *The Eyes of Our Hearts* is the country's first English-Malay anthology of writings by lesbians, bisexual women, and trans people, featuring stories that deal with issues of "struggling to fit in, falling in love, discovering friendship and community, and searching to understand one's sense of place and identity" (Kee, 2016, pp. vi-vii). Another local independent publisher called Gerakbudaya published this anthology. Established in 2000, Gerakbudaya publishes and distributes writings that "embody social awareness, [and provide] critical and alternative perspectives" about Malaysia and Southeast Asia (Gerakbudaya, 2021). Both anthologies are groundbreaking for being the first of their kind to be published in a country where non-normative gender and sexuality remain subject to social and legal condemnation. Although these publishers should be commended for their efforts, more needs to be known about what makes the works they published and MQL "queer".

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THE CHARACTERISTIC ELEMENTS OF MQL

MONSOON MASSAGE

"Monsoon Massage", tells the story of two former high school friends, Kumar and Reza whose chance meeting led to the discovery and revelation of their "true selves". The story is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator who provides a more accurate focalisation or representation of the queer and non-queer characters. The story begins with Kumar catching up on Reza whom he stumbled upon at a taxi stand. Many things have changed since leaving school: Kumar is now married, has two kids, and runs his own business, while Reza is a trained masseur who provides massage services to exclusively male clientele. But the most notable change of all is the "drastic physical transformation" that Kumar discovers upon seeing Reza's outward feminine appearance: "You are very different now", commented Kumar as he looked around in case there were people he might know, or people who knew him. They might catch him there talking to a mak nyah" (GnanaSelvam, 2009, p. 177). The physical appearance is focalised by the narrator through a detailed description of Reza's style of dress, hair, and mannerism:

> Pulling his hair up into a careless bun, he sat cross-legged on the bench and carefully pushed the edges of his skirt neatly over his feet. His crystal bracelets jingled a strange melody as he tapped on the back of his handbag, as if signaling for attention. (GnanaSelvam, 2009, p. 177)

Such a discovery reveals the story's queer element of the distortion of sex and gender norms. This element takes shape through the narrator's focalisation of Reza's sense of being and acting queer. "To be queer", as Rivera-Servera (2012, p. 27) posits, denotes the position assumed by individuals of non-normative sex/gender, while "to act queer" entails the strategies that these individuals employ to take up the said position. Such strategies may include bodily dispositions, styles of dressing, and modes of speaking that are employed by queer individuals to manoeuvre their lives in the heteronormative world. The story then proceeds to reveal some insights into why and how the transformation took place. Reza explains that he chose to be transgender, and this was done out of a desire to show his gratitude towards his male lover. The two men first met at a public university, and shortly afterwards, they became lovers. They ended the relationship when Reza's lover returned to his hometown and married a local girl. The two men met again by chance after many years and began seeing each other regularly. During one meeting, Reza sets his mind to pursue his gender transformation by wearing a dress that belongs to his lover's wife. As Reza recounts the incident:

> One day, he asked me to dress up in his wife's dress he had secretly brought with him. I had already taken so much from him. I had to show my gratitude. When I wore it, I saw great satisfaction in his eyes. I made up my mind. I went back to the mak nyah at Kampung Jawa for advice. I learned to put on make-up, tie my hair in different ways, buy lingerie, walk in high heels, and learned to wear bras. I transformed. (GnanaSelvam, 2009, p. 180)

Reza's recollection of the past unveils the story's queer element, that is, the multiplicity and variability of identities. Using the flashback technique, the narrator reveals how the sexual and gender identities of Reza and his male lover were multiple and fluid, rather than fixed and defined. Both men started as young male same-sex couples before one of them entered a heterosexual marriage and remained in the closet through their homosexual relationship. Reza was fully aware

of being a male when he dressed as a woman but eventually decided to become transgender out of sheer gratitude to his male lover.

As the story progresses, Reza tempts Kumar to try his massage service, to which the latter does not object since he needs a relaxing massage after a long day's work. Kumar justifies his bold move by arguing that he has been curious about what it would feel like to be serviced by a male masseur and that he trusts Reza as an old friend. And as Kumar watches Reza getting undressed, he makes another discovery about his former school friend, whose outward appearance might not be what he had previously expected: "There was nothing feminine on Reza's naked body. He had pectoral muscles, a toned body, and a stubble where he had shaved his body hair. He also had a penis" (GnanaSelvam, 2009, p. 182). Nevertheless, Kumar proceeds with the massage session and, surprisingly, succumbs to Reza's erotic charms. The story ends with Kumar coming home to a wife already asleep, with the "awkward smell of the massage oil still linger[s] on him" and Reza's business card "hidden in the darkest corner of his pocket" (GnanaSelvam, 2009, p. 184). These two incidents reinforce the story's queer elements of the multiplicity and variability of identities and the transgression of sex and gender norms. The elements are forged through the narrator's focalisation. More specifically, the narrator uses the plot's twists and turns to reveal the incongruity between what is expected and what happens concerning the characters' gender and sex-related behaviours. Kumar's discovery of Reza's male physique, on the one hand, shatters his preconceived idea of what a *mak nyah* (male-to-female transsexual) is (e.g., that 'all' *mak nyah* go through gender reassignment surgery to possess female physical attributes).

Kumar's erotic engagement with Reza, on the other hand, contravenes normative understandings of masculinity. Readers may have expected that Kumar would assume the role appropriate for his gender throughout the story. But the erotic massage session alters their expectation, that Kumar's sexuality may not be as fixed or defined as they may have previously thought. 'Interestingly', Kumar's erotic engagement with Reza reminds us of the straight Malaysian men in Lim's study (2015, p. 183) who developed sexual relations with transsexuals and/or feminised gay men without necessarily identifying themselves as "gay" or "bisexual". This ultimately brings home Pang's (2015) point on "the vague, fluid and unbounded ways many Malaysians view the myriad manifestations of non-normative gender and sexual expression" (p. 362).

I AM NOT GAY

"I Am Not Gay" is a true story based on an anonymous author's process of coming to terms with her search for identity and her struggle to come to terms with herself as a transgender woman.[2] The story is told through a series of notable events, which are woven with the author's reflections on who she was, who she is now, and who she will be. The author begins by describing her present identity (i.e., who she is now) as a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual who strongly identifies as a woman although she is designated male at birth.

> When I look at myself in the mirror, I see myself as a woman, although clearly, I can see the male parts. I am a pre-op, by the way, not to suggest that surgery is my ultimate goal, or that I would have an operation in the future. So without feminine parts, in spite of having my male parts, I still see myself as a woman, so that is how I define my gender, I am a woman. I am a woman who is sexually attracted to men. (*I am Not Gay,* 2016, p. 114)

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Such a description reveals the story's queer element of the distortions of sex and gender norms. This element is constructed through the author's conception of her gender identity which contravenes the normative understandings of masculinity. Rather than seeing herself as a man with a male physique and an intact male reproductive system, the author views and identifies herself as a woman who is sexually attracted to men.

The author then proceeds to describe her past identity (i.e., who she was) by recounting events of her childhood and adolescence and reflecting on how she perceived herself and how others perceived her during those periods. She recalls that she had a penchant for cross-dressing at a young age. This penchant developed not only out of her habit of wearing her mother's clothes, make-up, and shoes, but was also encouraged by her family members who would put those clothes on her occasionally and had never reprimanded her for cross-dressing. Although she admitted that she could at the time pass as a girl, her sense of being different had not gone unnoticed by her family members and relatives. There were occasions when she was told by her father to "toughen up, be a man, stop being a sissy", and there were also times when her cousins would come up to her mother and ask, "kenapa anak auntie macam pondan?" (Why is your son like a sissy?) (*I am Not Gay,* 2016, p. 114; my translation).

The author then recalls the experience of growing up differently in an all-boys boarding school environment. She remembers that she faced heavy bullying at school by her seniors for being effeminate and how she had to identify as a boy because of "being brainwashed into thinking that being different is bad, being different is wrong. If you were a boy with male parts, you have to act like a boy" (*I am Not Gay* 2016, p. 16). But the author was not the only 'effeminate' junior student at school, as there were others around. These students, along with the author, would use the "pet brother" mentoring system as a defense mechanism against the bullies.

> Each one of us would have a 'pet brother' an abang angkat, a senior who would take in a junior, under the pretext of mentoring the junior. Sometimes, each year it would be a different 'pet brother.' Some would actually respect the boundaries of 'mentoring' but for most, the relations were very sexual in nature, about pleasing the seniors, oral sex, blowjobs, and stuff like that.
>
> (*I am Not Gay,* 2016, 115)

Although the author's relations with her pet brothers were completely platonic, these relations had helped nurture her attraction toward men. Years later, the author went on to develop serious relationships with men, and they did not end well. She remembers a relationship she had with a Malaysian man when she was abroad. Not only did the author's lover see himself as a straight man, but he also perceived her as a gay man who should take on the feminine role in the relationship. The author was confused by this arrangement, and she began to think that she may not be a boy or even a gay man. The defining moment that helped confirm her sense of identity came during the incident involving herself and a salesperson at a department store. While looking through the more androgynous-looking designs in the men's clothing department, the salesperson directed the author to proceed to the women's clothing department due to her androgynous appearance and mannerism: "That was my defining moment because I was still struggling with my identity. But when that salesperson acknowledged me, identified me as a female, that was when I knew that I could entirely pass as a woman, and fully dress in women's clothes" (*I am Not Gay,* 2016, p. 117).

The author brings the story to a close by recalling incidents related to her present identity and how these incidents help her to come to terms with who she is now and what she will be. She recalls the arguments that she occasionally had with her mother, who never bluntly or directly

addressed the author's gender identity but would occasionally call her gender non-conforming actions erratic and irrational. However, the mother eventually accepted the author's gender identity after seeing how others had accepted her as a functional and contributing member of society. She also recalls the moments she would cross-dress in public and be accepted, especially by the people at her workplace and the private doctors she frequented for health needs. These incidents have brought her peace of mind and reassurance that she can live a life as the person she is and the person she will be in the future. She has finally come to terms with her identity and is ready to present her transgender identity now and in the future. As the author concludes the story:

> The way I see it is that I am at peace with myself, and God will judge me based on the rules that God set. I think God is forgiving and God is very tolerant, and God is very accepting of differences, of variances, of diversity, because we are to believe in the creation of God, why did God make us, why the differences, why the variances? That is how I see it. So when I die, I would be already at peace with myself, so the rest, whatever happens after, is what the living decides.
>
> (*I am Not Gay* 2016, 120-121)

What has been made clear here are the recollections of the author's past and the descriptions of her present life, and how these reinforce the story's queer elements: the multiplicity and fluidity of identities, and the transgression of sex and gender norms. The author's past recollections, on the one hand, reveal how she took on various identities, ranging from a boy who loved cross-dressing to an effeminate adolescent, from a gay man in a relationship with a straight male lover to a person with androgynous appearance and mannerism. The author's descriptions of her present life, on the other hand, disclose the fact that she no longer adheres to attitudes and behaviours that are proper to her male gender. Moreover, unlike the narrator in "Monsoon Massage", the author of "I am Not Gay" relies heavily on the use of the flashback technique to present the story events. The technique is used to further reveal the author's disruption of norms related to time as a distinctive feature of her life as a transgender woman. This is because the author's process of becoming transgender does not follow a linear progression over or with time. Rather, it is an unraveling process that sees the author moving back and forth between her past, present, and future in forging a transgender identity.

It is nevertheless important to clarify the terms cross-dressing and androgynous that are used here. Cross-dressing cannot be simply conflated with transgender people. Scholars such as Bolich (2007) and Panter (2018) argue that not all cross-dressers or individuals who cross-dress accept or call themselves transgender. Some people engage in cross-dressing for a number of reasons including having the desire to dress as the opposite binary sex or to act out the mannerism associated with the opposite sex without having to feel compelled to live full-time as the opposite sex (Panter, 2018). Some cross-dressers however do identify themselves as transgender because cross-dressing is "a hallmark cultural sign of transgender reality" - it not serves as "a visible expression of an internal cross-gender experience" but also as "the most convenient manner of displaying disavowal of one's assigned gender and affiliation with a different gender" (Bolich, 2007, p. 233). The same can be said of androgynous individuals who may not necessary call or identify themselves a transgender. Some people embrace androgyny (e.g., showing characteristics or behaviours of both sexes) as a form of self-expression, whether or not they have questions about their gender identity (Israel & Tarver, 1997). One explanation for this is that androgyny "offers the option of expressing whatever behaviour seems appropriate in a given situation instead of limiting responses to those traditionally considered as gender appropriate" (Alexander, LaRosa, Bader, Garfield, & Alexander, 2010). However, being androgynous and the term androgyny itself

mean different things to different people. Laura (male-to-female transgender) maintained that "Androgynous is a term others have used to describe me. Others have used that term because they cannot tell my sex by looking at me" (cited in Girshick, 2008, p. 20). Karen (male-to-female transgender) opined that being androgynous "gets the worst of both worlds, being subject to suspicion and contempt, not accepted by either men nor women, a target for derision or pity, at best on the fringes of society but never part of anything" (cited in Girshick, 2008, p. 20).

MQL AND THE TREATMENT OF LGBTQ PEOPLE IN MALAYSIA

Our discussion so far has shown that MQL is a new literary genre in Malaysia and is produced for a number of reasons including to open up avenues for conversations about queer that remains subject to denunciation by the larger mainstream society. Our discussion of the selected works of MQL has revealed the two characteristic elements of this new literary genre: the multiple conceptions of sexual and gender identities, and the distortions in the norms regulating sexuality and gender. These elements are important not simply because they make MQL "queer", but more importantly because they enable MQL and writers of this literary genre to respond to the differential treatment of LGBTQ people in Malaysia.

Many scholars have discussed how LGBTQ people have and continue to be differentially treated in the country on the basis of gender and sexual diversity. LGBTQ individuals are often portrayed in public discourse as a mental illness, a form of Western influence, and as a result of childhood sexual abuse (Subir, 2019; Tan, 2022). The media continues to shore up these images, along with the misconceptions that LGBTQ people are "perverted" and "moral vices" who deserve punishment and rehabilitation so that they can "return to the right path" (ARROW, 2020). To complicate matters, several programmes have been conducted to "reform" and "fix" LGBTQ people (especially those who are Muslim) with the aim to "change their attitude and their wayward lifestyle" (PROHAM, 2020). As a consequence, many LGBTQ people in Malaysia continue to experience stigmatization, and discrimination at some stages of their lives due to their sexual and gender diversity (Goh, 2020; Singaravelu & Cheah, 2020; SUHAKAM, 2019). Such a condition does not go unnoticed by many writers of MQL. From the above-discussed fictions, we can see that the writers allow readers and the general public to rethink about the pathologization, criminalization, and stigmatization of LGBTQ people in the country through the "queer" elements that characterize their works. For example, the element of multiple conceptions of sexual and gender identities that is manifest in the above-discussed works may enable readers to understand that sexual and gender identities are not fixed and stable. This is evidenced by the writers way of portraying their characters as individuals whose gender and sexual identities do not fit neatly into the heteronormative sex and gender binaries. The writers also show their characters are like other human beings who hold and navigate multiple identities in the course of their lives, and whose gender and sexual identities intersect with other identities (e.g., occupational identity, family identity, peer identity). Such multiplicity of identities may enable readers to question the way that LGBTQ people in the country are pathologized, criminalized, and stigmatized and that they should not be labelled and treated as such.

The element of the disruption of sexual and gender norms that is evinced in the above-discussed fictions also allows readers and the general public to understand that sexual and gender norms are never static and unchanging. This is because the characters in MQL negotiate and rupture sexual norms (e.g., socially 'acceptable' sex acts/practices) and gender norms (e.g., socially 'acceptable' behaviours designated for males and females) through the performance of

gender and sexual diversity. Although it can be argued that some characters, particularly those in the selected stories whose active/passive role allocation within sexual acts signifies and reinscribes a heteronormative, hierarchical relationship between male and female, we cannot simply ignore how they negotiate and distort sexual and gender norms. In "Monsoon Massage" we see a 'supposedly' straight man and a *mak nyah* whose chance meeting led to sexual activity. In "I am Not Gay" we see another 'supposedly' straight man who engaged in an erotic relationship with the anonymous author. The writers of the above-discussed fictions also show that their characters do not simply negotiate and disrupt sexual and gender norms. The negotiation and disruption of such norms form part of the characters' complex processes in being and becoming queer. This in itself may allow readers to question the way LGBTQ people have often been viewed as individuals who are confused over their gender and sexuality, and therefore must be converted in order to "balik ke pangkal jalan" (return to the right path) (PROHAM, 2020).

With these "queer" elements in mind, it can be said that MQL is able to respond to the differential treatment of LGBTQ people in the country in and through its "queer" way. It can also be said that MQL brings previously unheard or marginalised voices of queer Malaysians into the public space by opening discussions about their lives and livelihoods. These discussions are important as they provide a counter to how queer individuals have been ignored, silenced, and vilified by the larger Malaysian public on the basis of sexuality and gender diversity. Unless we listen to these marginalised voices, we are more likely to remain oblivious to the fact that queer Malaysians show as much variability in their backgrounds, life experiences, values, and aspirations as do other Malaysians. These variabilities must be seen as part of the complex fabric of Malaysian society.

CONCLUSION

This article examines Malaysian queer literature (MQL) in terms of what it is, its characteristic elements, and how the way it is written responds to the differential treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) people in Malaysia. The article uses the secondary data analysis method to examine existing resources on MQL to ascertain what it is, its origin, and evolution. The article then applies the analytical method developed by Blackburn et al. (2015) to examine the elements of MQL in Malaysia's anthologies of queer literature, namely, *Body 2 Body - A Malaysian Queer Anthology* (2009) and *Mata Hati Kita/The Eyes of Our Hearts* (2016). The analysis reveals that MQL is a new literary genre in the Malaysian literary scene and is produced for a number of reasons including to open up avenues of discussion about queer that remains subject to condemnation by the mainstream local society. Two characteristic elements of MQL are identified: the multiple conceptions of sexual and gender identities, and the disruption of normative notions regarding sexuality and gender. The analysis also reveals that MQL is written with these elements in mind as a way to respond to the discriminatory treatment of LGBTQ people in the country. The article has implications for current efforts that seek to use MQL not only to provide readers with the different ways of being in the world but also to rethink existing discourses that continue to condemn LGBTQ people on the basis of gender and sexual diversity. However, some limitations need to be acknowledged. This article focuses on local queer fiction in English in relation to its two characteristic elements. Further research is needed to examine similar works in various literary genres that are written in Malay and other local vernaculars, and investigate specific elements that make them "queer" and how these works respond to the ongoing differential treatment of LGBTQ people in the country.

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