

The Complexity Of Malay Muslim Identity In Dina Zaman's *I Am Muslim*

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ABSTRACT

Malay identity has been an important area of research in the field of Malay studies. Many scholars have argued that Malay identity is a product of a complex interplay of various identity markers and a dynamic adoption of diverse identity strategies. While most studies have focussed on examining Malay language, culture and religion as dominant identity markers of Malays in Malaysia, there is still a need for more research on other identity markers in the production of Malay identity. This paper explores the complexity of Malay Muslim identity, particularly queer Malay Muslims who are featured in Dina Zaman's *I am Muslim*. Using the theories and research relating to ethnic, racial, and sexual identity, the paper analyses the markers and strategies employed by queer Malay Muslims in constructing their identities as well as the tensions and conflicts they experience in formulating a Malay Muslim identity marked by queerness. The results show that queer Malays in Dina's work adopt varied identity markers and strategies in formulating their own ethnic identity which include embracing both sexuality and religious faith. The results also show that the discord between religion and sexuality becomes a major obstacle to some queer Malays who wish to assert their self-identities, but are not able to do so because of their strong *iman*, *taqwa* and *ahlaq*. The paper hopes to contribute to the research on Malay identity by demonstrating that same-sex sexuality, *in addition* to normative markers of Malayness, play a pivotal role in identity creation among queer Malay Muslims.

Keywords: ethnicity; Islam; queer; Malay; Malay Muslim identity

INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICS OF MALAY IDENTITY FORMATION

The identity of people who regard themselves as Malays remains an area of interest for many scholars in the field of Malay studies. This is because there will never be a satisfactory or clear-cut answer to "Who is Malay?" and "What it means to be Malay?" The term Malay includes Malays from Malaysia and other countries in the Malay Archipelago (also known as the Malay World) such as Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The Malay World, as Benjamin (2003) asserts, encompasses "at least Isthmian Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, the central east-coast parts of Sumatra, and much of the coastal northern, western and southern Borneo, Brunei, parts of Malaysian Sarawak, and parts of Indonesian Kalimantan" (as cited in Milner, 2008, p. 5). Benjamin (2003) further contends that the Malay World includes "populations who speak non-Malayic but still Austronesian languages (such as Batak, Mentawai and Lahanan), just as it contains Malayic speakers (such as the Ibans)

who do not fall into ‘Malayic’ societal pattern” (p. 29). The Malay world is also recognized and acknowledged as *Nusantara*, a preferred term among Malaysian and Indonesian intelligentsia to refer to the area inhabited by the Malays who use Malay as the main medium of communication (Asmah, 2008).

While acknowledging the Malays within Malaysia’s territorial boundaries and those from the Malay Archipelago are Malayo-Polynesian or Austronesian speakers who share a common historical origin and cultural heritages, it is crucial to note that the term Malay carries different meanings for different people in different contexts. Malays in Malaysia, for instance, are legally defined in terms of the three important markers of Malayness; namely, Muslim religion, Malay language, and culture. The Malaysian Constitution defines the Malays as “people who speak the Malay language as their mother tongue, lead the Malay way of life and profess the Islamic faith (Asmah, 1983, p. 79). The Constitution also recognizes Malay as the official language and, Islam, as the official religion of the Malay-dominated Malaysian nation-state. Numerous scholars have argued that Islam in particular not only functions as a key symbol of Malayness, but has become an essential feature of Malaysian Malay identity. This is particularly true when many Malaysian Malays identify themselves first as Muslim (Martinez, 2006), which strengthens the conflation of Malay with Muslim in the national imagery (Boellstorff, 2006).

There are, however, diverse and complex ways in which the term Malay have been configured and understood *outside* Malaysia’s national borders. Malays in Singapore, for example, do not necessarily comply with the Constitutional definition of Malaysian Malayness. Lim (2004) contends that the Singapore Constitution does not define Malays living in Singapore as Muslims, but only “‘recognises’ the special position of the ‘Malays’ and the Muslim religion” (p.118). Lim asserts further that “[the Singapore Constitution] does not contain a separate clause defining who the Malay people are, except for the reference in Article 152(2), which explains that they are ‘the indigenous people of Singapore’, and that ‘accordingly’ the Government has the ‘responsibility to protect, safeguard, support, foster, promote’, among other things, their ‘social and cultural interests and the Malay language’” (Lim, 2004, p. 118). Milner (2008), on the other hand, points out that Islam is one, but not the only means for defining Malayness elsewhere. The Christian Batak people in Sumatra, Indonesia, for example, continue to regard themselves as Malay mainly because they have adopted the language and culture of ethnic Malays over time. Such appropriations of *cara Melayu* (ways of the Malays), as Milner posits, are largely attributed to a long history of acculturation, where the Christian Bataks engaged in the process of *Malaynization* (becoming Malay) following their contacts with ethnic Malays through various means including trade and commerce (Milner, 2008, p. 84). Milner also argues that Malay language is not always an essential feature of Malay ethnic identity beyond Malaysia’s national boundaries. Malays in Sri Lanka and South Africa, whose ancestors came from Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula, use languages other than Malay as the medium of daily discourse. Sri Lankan Malays, for example, speak mostly Sinhala, while South African Malays use Afrikaans and English to communicate with one another (Milner, 2008, p. 3).

It is clear then that many Malays who live beyond Malaysia’s borders neither necessarily take on distinctive markers of Malay ethnicity nor fulfill religious and/or

linguistic requirements for being Malay as stipulated in the Malaysian Constitution, in regarding and identifying themselves as Malays. This corroborates Phinney's (2009) contention that "ethnic identity is not a fixed categorization, but rather a fluid and dynamic understanding of the self and his/her ethnic group that changes as it moves across various locales and contexts" (p. 347). Such a fluid and dynamic sense of ethnic identity is also felt and experienced by many Malays living in Malaysia. This is especially true when a Malaysian Malay sense of ethnic identity is not only expressed through normative markers of Malayness (i.e. Islam, Malay language and culture), but is mediated by a plethora of factors such as social class, descent, age, sex, gender, political and regional affiliations. Although these factors are intimately linked and infect each other in the process of Malay identity formation, they may appear to be mutually exclusive where one may exclude or preclude the other. For instance, loyalty to the home state may appear to be more important than social class in the creation of Malay identity among *orang Pahang* or *orang Terengganu*. Social class, on the other hand, is probably more important than age or gender in the processes of self-identification among the upper middle class or working class Malays. The same holds true for the central role that sexuality plays in the formation of identities among some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Malays. It is not entirely wrong to posit that cultural and religious markers of Malayness inflect upon or intersect with a myriad of factors in the production of Malay ethnic identity. As Thompson (2007) puts it, "gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, religion, age, and place all intersect at the crossroads of (Malay) identity (construction)" (p. 15; notes added). Although many Malaysian Malays open up the possibility of creating a fluid and dynamic sense of ethnic identity, it is important to highlight that such possibility is fraught with difficulties and challenges. This is evident in the case of queer Malays living in Malaysia who constantly experience tensions and conflicts in formulating Malay identities marked by queerness. Briefly, the term queer in this paper refers to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Malays in Malaysia. Since there are no equivalent words for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer in Malay, terms such as *pondan*, *bapok*, *keci*, and *darai* are used to describe Malay men who are effeminate or feminine in their appearances, mannerisms, and/or behaviours, and *pengkid* and *tomboi* are often used to address Malay lesbian women who adopt masculine mannerisms, while *mak nyah* is regularly used to denote Malay male-to-female transsexuals.

There are a number of reasons for the tensions and conflicts that I have just mentioned. Zainon and Kamila (2011) contend that homosexuality in Malaysia is considered "abnormal" and contravenes Malay culture and values (p. 283). This is mainly because Islam, which has become an essential marker of Malaysian Malay identity, outlaws homosexuality on the grounds that it is an abominable crime and the most heinous of human sins. Malay Muslims in Malaysia are constantly reminded of the story of the Prophet Lut, especially the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a result of God's anger against homosexual conducts. Queer Malays are often perceived by many Malays to be un-Malay and un-Islamic for their disregard of Islamic belief and teachings, and the failure to actualize their *fitrah* (natural disposition in humans) as Muslim men and women for engaging in same-sex sexual conducts; namely, *liwat* (sodomy) and *musahaqah* (lesbian sex). Many scholars have argued that the concept of Malay Muslim subjectivity within the context of the Malay world is deeply influenced and molded by culture and religion (Ahmad, 2006; Ruzy, 2006; Ruzy & Nor Faridah, 2003; Shamsul &

Mohamad Fauzi, 2006). Ruzy (2006), for instance, asserts that Malay Muslim men are expected to become fathers and the heads of the households, while Malay Muslim women are expected to comply with and actualise their *fitrah* by becoming wives and mothers (p. 16). Ruzy (2006) contends further that sexual relations between Malay Muslim husbands and wives are governed by the Quran and Hadith. This is especially true when marital and conjugal relations are religiously sanctified and culturally endorsed as the legitimate means of sexual gratification within the Malay Muslim society. It is correct to say that the the actualisation of *fitrah* is vital in the process of Malay Muslim identity, where Malays must fulfil cultural and religious expectations of masculinity/femininity including the social and familial pressures for marriage. However, the failure to actualise one's *fitrah* often calls into question one's identity as Malay within the dominant Malay Muslim community. This can be observed in the ways in which queer Malays have been criticised for being un-Malay and un-Islamic on the grounds that they defy their *fitrah* by articulating a sexually dissident Malay identity.

Queer Malays' involvement in same-sex sexual conducts has often been viewed by many Malays in Malaysia as a failure to possess adequate *iman* (religious faith), *taqwa* (God consciousness), and *ahlaq* (good moral behaviours). Asrul (2002) points out that *iman*, *taqwa* and *ahlaq* are key features of Malay Muslim identity. He maintains further that homosexuality, alongside cohabitation and other forms of social problems in the modern Malay Muslim society, is largely caused by the decline in religiosity and morality of many Malay Muslim youths. Those involved in such problems are "nominal Muslims" because they do not have *iman* and *taqwa* (Asrul, 2002, p. 351). Asrul's view helps explain why queer Malays are often perceived as Muslim *only* in or by name at the least. In the eyes of many Malays, queer Malays fail to practice their religious faith because queerness contravenes Islamic principles and practices. This raises the question of whether queer Malays can assert their identity *unproblematically* and/or *unconditionally* within the Malay Muslim society, a point to which I shall return to shortly.

Finally, it is not easy to identify oneself as queer Malay, considering that the processes of Malaysian Malay identity creation continue to be deeply entrenched in ethnicity and religion (Lian, 2001; Shamsul, 2001; Syed Husin, 2008). To complicate matters further, homosexuality is "obliterated" completely from the process of Malay ethnic identification (Zainon & Kamila, 2011, p. 283). This gives the impression that ethnicity and religion are more significant than same-sex sexuality and desire in Malaysian Malay identity formation. Verma (2002), for instance, maintains that "people's stronger ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations" continue to have a pervasive influence on notions of identity and sense of belonging in the modern Malaysian nation-state (p. 40). It is, therefore, not wrong to say that being Malay is equated with being Muslim. Such a unique and, at times, irrevocable equation between ethnicity and religion is inscribed in the Malaysian Constitution which defines "Malay" as a person who routinely speaks Malay, adheres to Malay customs, and professes the religion of Islam. This raises the question regarding identities of queer Malays: Can Malays identify and regard themselves as queer despite the normative pervasiveness of culture, ethnicity and religion in the formation of Malay identity in Malaysia?

METHODOLOGY

I shall address the question mentioned by analysing the complex processes of ethnic identification among Malay Muslims, particularly queer Malay Muslims who are featured in Dina Zaman's book *I am Muslim*. Using the theories and research relating to ethnic, racial, and sexual identity, the analysis focusses on the markers and strategies queer Malay Muslims in Dina's book use in constructing their identities as well as the tensions and conflicts they experience in formulating Malay Muslim identity marked by queerness. Before proceeding any further, some clarifications regarding the term queer is necessary. The term queer, as Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz (2005) posit, entered into the public consciousness in the 1990s to:

[challenge] the normalizing mechanism of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse. Given its commitment to interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity, the political promise of the term resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality. (p. 1)

The political promise of the term queer here can be applied to explain how queer Malays are able to challenge normalising mechanisms through and by which the Malay state elites exercise their power to designate a state-defined Malay identity. This is true when the Malay elites and the larger heteronormative Malay society continue to sanction a Malay identity that is not only constitutionally defined in terms of Malay culture and religion, but also materially organised around gender and sexual normativities. Queer Malays in Dina's and other Malaysian Malay Muslim writers' works challenge this state-defined Malay identity by forging a Malay identity marked by queerness. This corresponds with Tope's (2010) assertion that Malays featured in the works of some Malaysian Malay writers in English "disturb the formulated notions of ethnicity with their problematic sexualities" (p. 98).

My analysis of Dina's work aims to find out the strategies queer Malays employ in formulating their identities and the ways in which they redefine dominant conceptions of Malay-Muslimness which are produced and sustained through cultural, religious, gender, and sexual normativities. The analysis also examines the tensions and conflicts queer Malays often experience in formulating their own notions of self and identity. It is important to mention that Dina is a Malaysian Malay Muslim writer and editor whose works have appeared in *The New Straits Times*, *Malaysiakini* and *The Malaysian Insider*. Her fictional works have appeared in *Skoob Pacifica Anthology No. 2: The Pen is Mightier than the Sword* and in her anthologies of short fiction, entitled *night & day* and *King of the Sea*. Dina's nonfiction book, *I am Muslim*, delves into the lives and views of many Malaysian Malay Muslims on Islam and their religious faith. The book, which is made up of Dina's short articles published on *Sajakkini* and *Malaysiakini's* websites, is divided into four main sections: "Travels in Faith," "Sex within Islam," "Soul Searching," and "Portraits." The article entitled 'It's a Muslim Issue: How Gay Are You?' in the second section of the book draws attention to the strategies used by Malay Muslim lesbians and a self-identified gay Malay man in constructing a queer Malay

identity. My decision to use this article was based on the fact that Dina documents and discusses Malay Muslims' changing views of sexuality as well as the various ways in which they define their identity in terms of sexuality. An analysis of Dina's article "may offer alternative views on the ways in which Malay men (and women) define their identities in relation to sexuality" (Jerome, 2008, p. 36).

DISCUSSION

Hajah, whom Dina interviewed for her article, asserts that her sexuality is always in dissonance with her religious beliefs. She claims that if she embraced her sexuality fully, she would never be able to secure a place in heaven. Furthermore, Hajah does not regard her sexuality as a divine gift. She has even asked God to help her obliterate it completely, which is not easy simply because her desire for woman remains strong. As Hajah remarks:

I don't know what to do. When I went to Mecca for my Hajj, I prayed to God to take away my sexuality, make me normal, because no matter how hard I try to justify myself, the [Quran] does not sanction homosexuality. But when I came back... imagine. It's been years since I've been on a date with a woman. I go off for my second pilgrimage and wham! Women everywhere!
What do I do? (Dina, 2007, p. 106)

Given that the article does not mention the reason for such a remark, it is not wrong to say that Hajah's perception toward her sexuality and same-sex sexuality in particular is driven by the fear of, and strong faith (*iman*) in God. But her *iman* is clearly shakened or swayed by the thing she despises most – her same-sex desires.

The dissonance between Hajah's religious beliefs and her sexual desires is also felt and experienced by *tudung* lesbians who are also featured in Dina's article. *Tudung* lesbians are young, Malay Muslim lesbians who wear the *hijab* or *tudung* (head scarves) not only to demonstrate their obedience and devotion to God, but also to fulfill their religious obligation; that is, to protect and preserve their modesty by covering their *aurah* or *aurat* (a woman's entire body with the exception of her face and hands). Although it is not specifically mentioned in the article, such devotion is indeed shaped by *tudung* lesbians' strong *iman*, *taqwa*, and *ahlaq*. But just like Hajah, *tudung* lesbians continue to desire women and find that such desire is always in discord with their strong moral and religious upbringings, as well as their *fitrah* as Malay Muslim women. As Dina writes:

[Tudung lesbians were] confused and frightened. They asked me the same question: how could they be gay when they were brought up as good Muslims? They wore scarves, they didn't mess about, they prayed they were good daughters and friends, but they desired only women (Dina, 2007, p. 110).

It is important to point out that not all queer Malay Muslims living in Malaysia agree with Hajah and *tudung* lesbians' views about same-sex sexuality and desire. Haji Zainal Abidin, a self-identified gay Malay man whom Dina interviewed for her article, is a good case in point. As Haji Zainal asserts:

I don't see myself in conflict with God...The [Quran] talks about how God creates perfection. So if you're born handicapped – without an arm or leg, or you're

blind; that in God's eyes is perfection itself. My homosexuality as far as I'm concerned, is perfection in God's eyes. I didn't ask to be gay. I was born gay. I never knew anything else (Dina, 2007, p. 107).

Clearly, Haji Zainal adopts a specific strategy in constructing his own notion of being Malay. This can be seen in the way Haji Zainal reconciles his sexuality with his religious faith and finds no difficulty in doing so. Moreover, Haji Zainal views his sexuality and male same-sex sexuality as God's perfect gift. Such a positive perception of same-sex sexuality concurs with Yip's (2005) findings on queer Muslims in his ethnographic research, who claim that their sexuality is God's creation and, therefore, is inseparable from their sense of self and identity: "Sexuality (for many queer Muslims) is a 'gift,' and flawlessly made in the image of God...Sexuality, therefore, should not be isolated from one's being (e.g., one's spirituality, emotions, body)" (Yip, 2005, p. 277). Haji Zainal's positive view on same-sex sexuality also concurs with Zainon and Kamila's (2011) findings on gay Malay Muslim respondents in their study who are happy with being gay despite the fact that homosexuality contravenes the teachings of Islam.

Dina's discussion of Haji Zainal, Hajah and *tudung* lesbians reveals the tensions and conflicts queer Malays often experience in formulating their own self-identity. If gay Malay male informants in Zainon and Kamila's (2011) study experience "the conflict between assimilating into the mainstream society and embracing Islamic belief and teachings" (p. 290), Malay lesbian informants in Dina's article are not able to identify themselves as queer Malay because they cannot resolve the conflict between their *iman* and sexuality. Haji Zainal, however, is able to regard himself as a gay Malay Muslim embracing *both* queerness *and* religion. The processes of self-identification among queer Malays in Malaysia, then, are indeed fraught with *both* possibilities *and* limitations. Sedgwick (1990) maintains that self-identification is a complex process which is rife with immense potentialities *and* complications. This is because the very act of identifying is inflected by multiple forms of identification, which include one's identification *with* and one's identification *as against*. As Sedgwick contends:

After all, to identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identification *with*. It also involves identification *as against*; but even did it not, the relations implicit in *identifying with* are, as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, loss, reparation, and disavowal (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 61; original emphases).

Segwick's concept of identification *as*, identification *with*, and identification *as against*, albeit situated in the context of women and gay men in the West, can be used to explain self-identification processes among queer Malays in Malaysia. *Tudung* lesbians and Hajah formulate a lesbian Malay identity through identification *with* female same-sex sexuality and religion. However, they often experience difficulties in resolving the conflict between their identification *with* same-sex sexuality and their Islamic faith because of their strong *iman*, *taqwa* and *ahlaq*. This unresolved conflict, alongside the feelings of anxiety, fear and confusion as a result of being different, have caused *tudung* lesbians and Hajah to identify themselves *as against* lesbian; that is, they cannot embrace their lesbianity and identify themselves fully as lesbians. Some *tudung* lesbians whom

Dina interviewed identify themselves *as against* lesbian because they view and define themselves more in terms of their relationships with others including family, friends, and God. The presence of *taqwa* is particularly strong in one *tudung* lesbian who admits that, “I’m trying to define who I am, not just in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of God. I talk to some people, they say to me, if you’re gay, you’re gay, just embrace it. *I can’t, I think a lot about religion*” (Dina, 2007, p. 112; emphasis added). Haji Zainal, on the other hand, forges and sustains a gay Malay identity through identification *with* male same-sex sexuality and religion. Moreover, Haji Zainal is able to identify himself unproblematically and unconditionally as a gay Malay man because he views his identification *with* religion and male same-sex sexuality to be in harmony with each other, despite the fact that the latter contravenes his *fitrah*. As Haji Zainal asserts, “I am very comfortable being a Muslim who happens to be gay” (Dina, 2007, p. 107).

Dina’s article also offers further insights into the ways in which queer Malays revise and redefine dominant formulation of Malay identity. Haji Zainal and Hajah, for instance, rethink customary notions of *Haji* and *Hajah* as understood by many Malay Muslims in Malaysia. The terms *Haji* (for men) and *Hajah* (for women) are often used to refer to Malay Muslims who have fulfilled their religious obligations of performing the *hajj*. Additionally, these terms have often been associated by many Malay Muslims in Malaysia with piety and submission to God. Malay Muslims who have completed the *hajj* usually demonstrate their sense of piety by assuming a religious persona which is expressed through a variety of external markers which include wearing Arab clothing and taking more “Islamic” names to suit such persona (Roff, 2003, p. 49). Haji Zainal and Hajah, however, revise settled notions of *Haji* and *Hajah* by sustaining their Islamic status and *iman* without necessarily denouncing their sexuality and same-sex desires. *Tudung* lesbians, on the other hand, rethink received ideas about donning the *hijab* or *tudung* among Muslim women in Malaysia. The dominant Malay Muslim community often regard Malay Muslim women who don the *hijab* or *tudung* as heterosexual women with strong *iman* and *ahlaq*. *Tudung* lesbians dispute this by continuing to put on the *hijab* or *tudung* whilst simultaneously sustaining their religious faiths and good moral behaviours, as well as their feelings and desires for women. As Dina puts it:

What struck me was my ignorance and small-mindedness pertaining to this matter: I actually thought that there was no way a girl in a *tudung* could be homosexual. *You’re wearing a tudung, for crying out loud, you have taken a divine oath to be a good Muslim, you can’t be lesbian*. Later I thought, what you wear and practise has no bearing on the person who you really are. (Dina, 2007, p. 110; original emphasis)

Dina’s afterthought shows that what it means to Malay for *tudung* lesbians cannot be described in terms of religious markers and practices mainly because female same-sex sexuality, *iman*, *taqwa* and *ahlaq*, alongside the said markers, constitute an essential part of their identity as Malay Muslim women. The same holds true for Haji Zainal and Hajah whose notions of being Malay are not solely formulated through religious symbols and practices. Haji Zainal and Hajah use *both* their sexuality *and* the their new Islamic status as a strategic means for identifying and realigning themselves as pious (*beriman*) queer Malay Muslims in the Malay Muslim community. My point here is not to question the significance of the *tudung* or the titles *haji* or *hajah* as the religious markers of Malay

Muslim identity in Malaysia. What I'm trying to demonstrate is that queer Malays in Dina's article offer a nuanced understanding of what it means to be Malay. This is portrayed in the ways in which Dina's queer Malay informants construct their own ethnic identity through sexual difference while simultaneously maintaining cultural and religious features of Malayness. Such queer ways of being Malay buttress my contention that Malay ethnicity cannot be constructed solely through cultural, religious, gender, *and* sexual normativities simply because many ethnic Malays (queer Malay men and women in particular) are not *just* Muslims who practise Malay traditions and customs, but organize their lives and identities around same-sex sexuality, desires, and practices. Whether or not they are "nominal Muslims" for failure to possess adequate *iman* and *taqwa* remains subject to further discussion.

CONCLUSION

My analysis of queer Malay Muslims in Dina's work has shown that queer Malay identity formation is a complex process where a plethora of factors inflect each other in the production of sexually dissident Malay identity. My analysis has also demonstrated that queer Malays in Dina's work employed varied strategies in formulating their own ethnic identity which include embracing both sexuality and religious faith. Such a queer notion of ethnic identity revises and redefines dominant conceptions of Malay-Muslimness that are produced and sustained through the Malay culture and religion, as well as normative expectations of gender and sexuality in Malay society. However, there are conflicts queer Malays often experience in constructing Malay identities marked by queerness as evidenced in the discord between same-sex sexuality and religion, which has become a major obstacle to some queer Malays who wish to assert their self-identities, but are not able to do so because of their strong *iman*, *taqwa* and *ahlaq*.

I have to admit that my analysis does not reveal whether religious identity is more important to queer Malays in Dina Zaman's work compared to their ethnic identity. My analysis also does not examine how queer Malays in Dina's work articulate their identities in various spaces. This is mainly because I am confined to Dina's discussion of her informants' perceptions of their sexuality and the ways in which it affects their notions of self and identity. I would certainly be able to do so if I were given the opportunity to interview the informants myself. Some of these informants may "strategically renegotiate and accommodate their ethnic, religious, *and* same-sex sexual identities as they move fluidly across various social spheres, which include heteronormative and queer designated spaces" (Jerome, 2012, p. 177). In other words, the informants may identify themselves as Malay Muslim (and even adopt a public heterosexual identity) as a way of being in the dominantly heteronormative Malay Muslim community while simultaneously adopting a queer identity (either gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered) in relation to others within the local queer community. Some of these informants may not necessarily identify themselves as queer despite engaging in same-sex sexual conducts. It would be interesting to hear what queer Malays have to say about their own experiences, particularly the strategies that they employ in identifying themselves as queer Malay Muslims across varied local spaces (and even beyond) where culture, ethnicity and religion remain pervasive in the process of Malaysian Malay identity formation.

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