Prison's spoilt identities: Racially structured realities within and beyond

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Abstract

This article begins by seeking an explanation for the solidarity between Malay inmates and guards in perpetrating abusive and discriminatory treatment towards Malay transvestites. In the course of explaining an empirical phenomenon in the Singapore prison, this article has examined Singapore's history and ethnic demography, the ethnic Malay minority's lack of socio-economic development and modernisation vis-à-vis the ethnic Chinese majority, geo-politics, the ideology and strategic choices of the state's political elite and their implications for inter-ethnic interactions between Malays and Chinese. As this article will argue, prison culture, rather than being divorced from larger society, is in effect able to articulate and elaborate on the processes of social exclusion faced by ethnic Malay minorities and male transvestites in Singapore society. By shifting the conceptual focus from 'prison in society' to 'prison of society', a new analytical dimension of informal inmate culture and social structure has been realised; one which suggests immense possibilities for prison literature.

Introduction

Prisons have been normatively conceptualised as 'total institutions' (Goffman 1961) and 'complete and austere institutions' (Foucault 1979), historically adapted from Roland's (1930) notion of 'segregated communities' and Etzioni's (1957) concept of 'closed institutions'. Fundamentally, the various terminologies converge on their emphasis of the 'total' character of the prison, signifying an 'artificially created, autonomous socio-cultural enclave in which inmates are subjected to a depersonalising and totalitarian regimen' (Goffman 1961). Within the total institution, the prison population has been conceptualised as a dichotomy of 'the large managed group, conveniently called inmates, and the small supervisory staff' that corresponds to a division along the axis of power (Goffman 1961:18). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's (1979:136) analysis of the penal process as an exercise of power by the authorities over inmates who are described as 'docile bodies that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' similarly alludes to the divide between inmates and custodians along the axis of power. Although Foucault (1979) argues that the imposition

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of power in the process of disciplining and inmate management are not merely a top-down exercise and that coercion was not so manifest, he nevertheless accords primacy to structural factors as the impetus in orientating inmates' actions. Specifically, Foucault emphasises the panoptic effect of the prison in eliciting the input of the inmates in imprisoning themselves. Conceptualising the prison as a total institution has influenced the idea that the prison population is a dichotomy of inmates versus guards whose interactions revolve around relationships of force and dominion.

Conceptualising prison as a total institution besides suggesting a physical separation between the prison and the 'free community' (Clemmer 1958), has concurrently translated into an intellectual separation. What is meant by intellectual separation is that prison sociologists tend to find recourse in a deterministic, structural-functional analysis in their research and observations of institutions, which leads prison literature to emphasise the internal conditions of imprisonment as a stimulant of inmate social structure and culture, administrative organisation and various empirical realities within the prison (Irwin & Cressey 1962). Intellectual separation here highlights the failure of prison sociologists to realise that much like other aspects of our social reality, inmate culture and social structure cannot be understood without an examination of the social conditions at a particular point in history within which it exists. To illustrate, much of inmates' behaviour according to the deprivation theory could be interpreted as attempts – whether conscious or unconscious – to meet and counter the problems posed by the deprivations of prison life. Included among the deprivations of prison life are 'loss of liberty, goods, services, heterosexual contact, autonomy and security and also psychological threats to their self-conception or sense of worth, such as being reduced to childhood's dependence or being forced into homosexual liaisons' (Sykes 1958:63).

Based on the assumption of prison as a total institution, the deprivation theory of imprisonment which adopts a structural-functional perspective, suggests that 'the inverted sexology of all-male incarceration counters the problems posed by the deprivations of heterosexual contact in prison' (Money & Bohmer 1980; cf Sykes 1958; Dumond 1992; Rideau 1992; Donaldson 2001; Castle et al 2002). The inverted sexology of all-male incarceration subdivides into 'masturbation, wet dreams, consenting homosexual pairing with one partner being exclusively androphilic and the other bisexual, consenting homosexual pairing in association with heterosexual imagery where one partner is exclusively androphilic and the other heterosexual, coercive partnerships with one partner dominating but not injuring the other and neither being permanently and exclusively androphilic and rape' (Money & Bohmer 1980:258). The inverted sexology within the homosocial prison environment that is of particular interest to this article is the consenting homosexual pairing in association with heterosexual imagery. This is where one partner is exclusively androphilic – specifically male transvestites – and the other partner is heterosexual. Proponents of the deprivation theory have asserted that 'the single sex environment of the male prison where hundreds or thousands of men are deprived of their ordinary mode of sexual expression inevitably enable male transvestites to practise their art with even greater impunity and appreciation' (Money & Bohmer 1980:259).

The data gathered in this article firstly challenges the notion that power operates in a coercive fashion within the prison thus producing identifiable divisions in the crystallisation of roles assumed by custodians and inmates. Secondly, the data collected challenges the idea that male transvestites who are inclined towards homosexuality necessarily possess a currency to survive the context of single-sex incarceration, as hypothesised by the deprivation theory. This article aims to explain the uncharacteristic solidarity expressed by the 'Malay', 'male', 'masculine', 'heterosexual' inmates *and* prison personnel – as

compared to their Chinese and Indian counterparts – in perpetrating verbal and physical abuse and overt discriminatory treatment towards the almost exclusively 'Malay', 'male', 'feminine', 'homosexual' transvestite population, as observable in the Singapore male prisons. Henceforth, the term 'Malay transvestites' will denote the 'male', 'feminine', 'homosexual' transvestite population in the Singapore prisons that comprises almost exclusively of Malays. Conversely, 'Malay', 'male', 'masculine', 'heterosexual' inmates and guards who differ from Malay transvestites along the lines of gender and sexuality by subscribing to the normative construction of sex, gender, and sexuality as the majority of inmates in the Singapore prisons do, will be referred to as 'Malay inmates' and 'Malay guards'.

The theoretical frameworks that seek to explain inmate culture and social structure, derived from conceptualising prison as a total institution, are limited in their capacity to explain the aforementioned empirical phenomenon observable within the Singapore male prisons. Such a limitation, I will argue, is attributable to the insistence on a physical cum intellectual separation between the prison institution and the free community that is not only erroneous, but has simultaneously resulted in the conceptual and theoretical underdevelopment of prison literature (Mathiesen 1966; cf Dikotter & Brown 2007). Thus, I am establishing here that this article neither approaches the topic of sexuality in prison in any conventional way nor does it endeavour to test whether the deprivation or importation model of imprisonment better explains the empirical phenomenon in question. Rather than subscribing to a conventional, structural-functional analysis, this article emphasises how an empirical phenomenon in prison constitutes an underlying reaction to, and accordingly sheds light on, the processes of socio-economic and political marginalisation occurring in larger society.

Accordingly, this article aims to invigorate and to internationalise the ethnography of the carceral universe understood both as a microcosm endowed with its own material and symbolic tropism and as vector of social forces, political nexi, and cultural processes, imported from larger or Singapore society, that traverse its walls. The solidarity between Malay inmates and guards in perpetrating overtly abusive and discriminatory treatment towards the Malay transvestites, I will argue, constitutes a reaction towards the latter whose socio-economic marginalisation in prison reflects, entrenches and exacerbates the socio-economic and politically marginal status of ethnic Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in Singapore society. This parallel between the economic marginality and ostracism of Malay transvestites in prison and the socio-economic and political marginality of the Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in Singapore society has induced Chinese inmates to initiate a derogatory 'ethno-racial' (cf Goldberg 1992) discourse that racialises 'Malayness' with marginality. This ethno-racial discourse has the effect of intensifying and strengthening the 'spoilt identity' (Goffman 1961) of the Malays, whether in prison or Singapore society, as 'socio-economically marginalised, weak, subordinate and incapable of surviving in a modern society' (Rahim 1998). Additionally, the ethno-racial discourse that identifies transvestites as 'Malays' facilitates imputing and essentialising the conspicuous attributes of transvestites onto the male members of the Malay 'race'. Two conspicuous traits of transvestites, their feminine demeanour and their homosexuality, results in the discursive 'gendering of male members of the Malay race' as effeminate (read: weak, subordinated) and the 'racialisation of the sexuality' of Malay men as predisposed towards homosexuality. Ethno-racialising the marginality, femininity and homosexuality of Malay transvestites onto the male members of the Malay 'race', rather than with transvestites specifically, inevitably implicates the image of the Malay inmates and guards, who share overlapping social identities as 'Malay' and 'male' with the Malay transvestites. The ethno-racial discourse that is ignited by the Malay

transvestites in effect implicates all Malays. This is crucial in explaining the solidarity expressed by Malay inmates and guards in perpetrating verbal and physical abuse and overt discrimination towards Malay transvestites.

Reflecting on the way Chinese inmates ethno-racialise the marginality of Malay transvestites as an inherent trait of Malayness imported from their impression of Malays in Singapore society, this article will rectify prevalent conceptualisations of 'prisons as institutions in society' by developing an antithetical concept of 'prison of society'. Although official prison discourse highlights the expressed femininity and homosexuality of transvestites as a basis for their marginalisation within the single sex/gender milieu of the prison, the ethno-racial discourse perpetuated by Chinese inmates challenges the official rationalisation. Contrarily, Chinese inmates read the socio-economic marginality that characterises Malay transvestites in prison as an expression of the inherent attribute of Malayness since Malays in Singapore society are also socio-economically and politically marginalised in relation to the ethnic Chinese majority. The disjuncture between the official prison discourse and the ethno-racial discourse constructed by Chinese inmates proves that the conceptualisation of prison as a total institution is fallacious. Inmates do not become 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1979) upon entry into the prison, divorced from the socio-economic and political relations of which they were a part of, which in this case refers specifically to members of a particular race within a multi-racial context. Power is not unidirectional, as reflected by the data, to be exercised by the custodians of control on the inmates but the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and discourse of ethno-racialisation does affect the flow of power within the prisons. In a context where race consciousness is ignited and the management of the spoilt identity of the Malays is at stake, Malay guards establish solidarity with Malay inmates and in so doing, accord the latter with more power to be exercised over Malay transvestites. The exercise of power by Malay inmates over Malay transvestites who are perceived to be exacerbating the spoilt identity of the Malay 'race' is sanctioned by Malay guards.

Field Research with Malay Male Transvestites in Prison

For a myriad of reasons, qualitative methodology was favoured in this study. A quantitative questionnaire, defined by the researcher's analytical perspective where certain questions are deemed significant for analysing social behaviour, restricts the voice of the informants as the subsequent categories that these questions give rise to may not accurately reflect how the participants think about what they are doing. Additionally, my meagre exposure to the penal phenomenon could potentially incorporate inappropriate assumptions and frameworks during the process of designing a quantitative questionnaire. This would inevitably produce distorted accounts of the lived realities of Malay transvestites in prison. Furthermore, a self-administered questionnaire would assume a high level of formal education on the part of the informants which would have been problematic since most of the participants were illiterate in English. Conversely, in-depth interviews managed to capture the complexities of inmates' everyday life and interaction patterns that were vital in generating rich data and sound theorisations. Through in-depth interviews, my participants also provided me with the names and the five-digit identification numbers of several transvestites who had been labelled 'too vocal' and 'deviant' by the administrators and staff members in prison and who were intentionally excluded from my study. Snowball sampling became a productive mode of sampling informants because it provided me the opportunity to rectify the otherwise skewed sampling of informants that I would have ended up with at the discretion of the prisons' administrators. Since the prison administration claimed ownership of tape-

recordings, I transcribed interviews in a personal diary to uphold the confidentiality clause in the indemnity form.

In order to sample participants whose incarceration experiences were pertinent towards clarifying and developing an understanding of the research topic, it was crucial to distinguish 'transvestites' from the category of 'catamites'. 'Catamites' as used in the Singapore prisons is conceptually deflated since its failure to specify the subset groups within the 'homosexual' community conceptually reduces the complexity of homosexual behaviour to a single dimension of sexuality. Additionally Lorber (1994:84-89) has highlighted the various dimensions of homosexuality as a typology of '*transvestites* who cross-dress but have not undergone a sex-reassignment surgery, a *transsexual* who has had sex-change surgery, and the remaining *homosexuals* who neither cross-dress nor have the desire to undergo a sex-change operation, although their sexual object of choice remains a male person' (cf Teh 2003:12). The participants' emic definition of themselves corresponded to Lorber's (1994) typology of 'transvestites' where gender constitutes a crucial theoretical construct in the presentation of self and in orienting their actions. Despite inserting breast implants, consuming hormone pills and cross-dressing all the time, the participants affirmed that they have neither surgically altered their genitalia to make their sex correspond to their gender identity nor have a desire to do so.

Distinguishing Between the Concepts 'Prison in Society' and 'Prison of Society' and Examining their Theoretical Implications

Conceptualising the prison as an institution in, but not of the society in which it exists, henceforth known as 'prison in society', is historically influenced by the dominance of anthropological perspectives in criminology. Empirical studies of the prison community are typically ethnographies of a microsociety, where the prison is compared to a primitive society, isolated from the outside world and functionally integrated by a delicate system of mechanisms, which kept it precariously balanced between anarchy and accommodation (Stastny & Tyrnauer 1982:131). In line with the 'microsociety model of the prison', Hans Reimer, following his self-imposed incarceration in mid-1930s, confined his observations to inmate life which describes an essentially autonomous community outlined by a social hierarchy, mores, attitudes, and a mythology. Grosser (1960:1) describes inmate society as a 'social microcosm' with its own argot, leaders, laws, rites and rituals that are in perpetual conflict with 'the prevailing order of society, personified by the institutional personnel'. The culture concept is basic to these early prison studies (Stastny & Tyrnauer 1982:131).

Operating on the prison in society premise imparts a canonical quality to sociological theorisation of informal inmate culture and social structure as an inevitable consequence of 'prisonisation'. Prisonisation conceptually refers to 'the process by which a new inmate takes on the norms, customs, values, and culture in general of the penitentiary and learns to adapt to the prison environment' (Clemmer 1958:298). Prison in society influences theorisations so as to emphasise not the conditions that determine the degree of socialisation into the informal inmate culture and social structure, but rather for those explaining why the culture is there to be socialised into. Lacking analytical depth, the informal inmate culture and social structure, conceptualised as antithetical to the formal prison administration (although inevitable in every custodial institution), have systematically been theorised as a form of structural accommodation to the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes 1958). Concepts of 'pains of imprisonment' and 'prisonisation' are premised on the questionable conception of imprisonment as a process of 'border crossing into a society that is organized differently and

centred around a different culture than the everyday world left behind, a passage that is acknowledged by the prison culture distinction between the world of the joint and the outside free world' (Jones & Schmid 1999:1).

As I will argue, both the deprivation and importation theories that have been developed to account for the adaptive nature of inmate social structure and culture are based on the prison in society concept. The deprivation model proposes a structural-functional explanation of inmate culture as an adaptive response to the institutional features of prisons. To explain why heterosexual inmates engage in homosexual behaviour within the single sex/gender prison milieu, especially favouring 'queens' or male transvestites, proponents of the deprivation model typically frame situational homosexuality in terms of 'social types or role patterns which members living in a particular social world believed to be important' (Strong 1943:564; cf Money & Bohmer 1980; Rideau 1992; Donaldson 2001). Proponents of the deprivation model have emphasised the function of 'social types', collectively termed 'argot roles', in dealing with the major deprivations of prison life (Sykes 1958:84). The situational homosexuality of 'wolves' and 'jockers' in prison, who are otherwise heterosexual in the free community, has been interpreted by deprivation theory as a need for sexual expression and as a way for inmates to resist their forcible feminisation during incarceration, marked by helplessness, loss of autonomy and forced obedience to the hostile figure of the officialdom (Clemmer 1958; Man & Cronan 2001). Within the prison, homosexual relations, whether consensual or coercive, are rationalised by inmates as heterosexual based on the performance of socially affirmed gender statuses constructed within the sex act (Lorber 1994:30). The homosexual act in which the wolves, and jockers *penetrate*, while the 'fags', 'punks' and 'queens' (Sykes 1958:84) are *penetrated* distinguishes the *masculine* from the *feminine*. Although fags and queens are both inclined towards homosexuality, queens perform femininity by 'tying up their shirttail, making toilet paper mammary glands and smiling provocatively at well-hung prisoners' (Money & Bohmer 1980:261) while fags retain their masculinity. Punks refer to heterosexual inmates who are penetrated during the homosexual act either under duress or to gain certain goods or services (Eigenberg 1992:222). Within the homosocial prison, queens are preferred over punks and fags because their manifest femininity, in direct contrast to the 'masculinity of male inmates who flex their muscles, adjust their crotches, and put on as good a show as the drag queens' – facilitates the appreciation of homosexuality as a heterosexual act (Money & Bohmer 1980:261).

Inmate culture and social structure that the deprivation model proposes are developed as an adaptive response to the deprivations of imprisonment are contrarily purported by the importation theory as being affected by the experiences and values of prisoners prior to their incarcerations. Consequently the deprivation and importation model are perceived as antithetical (Irwin & Cressey 1962; Thomas 1975; Hawkins 1976; Adams 1992). I contrarily argue that viewing the deprivation and importation models of imprisonment as dichotomous result from erroneously basing the former on the concept of prison in society and the latter as suggesting that the socio-economic and political dynamics within larger society could be replicated within the prison or possibly affect inmate culture and social structure. Such a misinterpretation derives from 'proponents of the importation theory urging researchers to focus on pre-institutional behaviour patterns since criminal dispositions and behavioural patterns prior to incarceration possess strong explanatory power in accounting for inmate behaviour' (Roebuck 1963:193). Rather than premised on the permeability of the prison to the socio-economic and political dynamics of the free community, importation theory merely suggests that where relevant, inmates may draw on or modify a subset of their pre-incarceration values and experiences to adapt to the conditions of a total institution (Thomas

& Foster 1973:231). The crucial issue for proponents of the importation model remains how the inmates' pre-incarceration values and experiences might be reinforced or called into play by the realities of prison life. The innovative proposition of the importation model that inmate behaviour is conditioned by their pre-incarceration values is neglected due to the persistent notion that the inmate social system would emerge almost without regard to inmates' criminal histories – an idea influenced by assumptions about the power of totalitarian systems to shape behaviour and the limited possibilities of dealing with the threats posed by imprisonment (Sykes 1995:82).

Although deprived of heterosexual contact, the solidarity between Malay inmates and guards in perpetrating abusive and discriminatory treatment towards Malay transvestites challenges the assumption of both deprivation and importation models which assume that inmate culture reflects rational choice, aimed at coping with the deprivations of incarceration. The assumption that inmates' actions are always instrumental within a total institution has impeded a systematic attempt to incorporate the significance of racial, political, and religious stratification within the free community in fostering a holistic understanding of prison organisation. Consequently, both the deprivation and importation models – founded on the prison in society concept – are limited in their capacity to appreciate the antagonistic attitude of Malay inmates and guards towards the Malay transvestites that is only explicable by taking into account the socio-economic and political relations between the Malays and Chinese in Singapore society.

In Singapore, the socio-economic disparity and political inequality between the Chinese and Malays as well as the marginal role played by Malays in Singapore's development have been extensively documented (Yusof 1986; Li 1989; Zoohri 1990, 1987; Rahim 1998; Mutalib 2005; Lee 2006; Lian 2006). The inescapable fact that Singapore Malays have never been active participants in the economic and political structure of Singapore has induced a perception among both Malays and non-Malays that Malays are incapable of operating successfully and independently in a modern productive society. The ideal Singaporean who has contributed substantially to Singapore's development possesses 'achievement motivation, a money orientation, a competitive spirit and a desire for upward mobility, qualities that are fundamentally congruent with the historical performance of Singapore Chinese rather than Malays' (Betts 1975:299-300). Since the 1980s, both the Singapore government and Malay community leaders have been concerned about the educational performance of the Malay community that has been lagging behind the Chinese and Indian communities, which not only hinders the extent of Malay participation in the national economy but also threatens inter-ethnic harmony (Tan 1995:340). Zoohri (1990:9) asserts that Malays are incapable of associating themselves with modern trade and commerce because the absence of the right education means that Malays have to opt for occupations of low economic status which inevitably makes them poorer than the other communities.

With regards to the political marginality of Malays in relation to the Chinese in Singapore, ever increasing attention has been accorded to the issue of ethnicity (race) in the security policies of the city-state (Mutalib 2002:40). Singapore's history of merger and later being booted out of the Malaysian federation (1963-65), and its geographical location between the two larger nations of Malaysia and Indonesia, whose numerically and politically dominant Malay populations have had recent histories of anti-Chinese sentiment, have made the ethnic idiom a paramount factor in the mindset of the republic's elites (Mutalib 2002:43; cf Milne & Mauzy 1990). This governmental pre-disposition has been asserted more vigorously in recent years given the ethnic imbroglio in this region and elsewhere. Consequently, the government is unrelenting and unapologetic in its belief that

ethno-religious pulls are here to stay even in modern societies such as Singapore's. Despite the disenchantment expressed by Singapore's minority ethnic Malays, who see the government's Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) standpoint as discriminatory and contradictory to the avowed policy of meritocracy, many strategic and sensitive appointments in the SAF will continue to be 'out-of-bounds' to Malay soldiers even if they perform well in their basic military training during compulsory National service (Mutalib 2002:43).[1] These areas include armoury and tank units as well as front-line combat infantry. Lee Kuan Yew's statement on this matter has not escaped the attention of many:

> If for instance, you put in a Malay officer who's very religious and who has family ties in Malaysia in charge of a machine gun unit, that's a very tricky business ... if today the Prime Minister doesn't think about this, we could have a tragedy (*The Sunday Times* 1999:26).

As a subset of the dominant ethnic Chinese majority in Singapore, the perception of Chinese inmates regarding the Malays is inescapably influenced by the 'racially structured reality' (Back & Solomos 2000) of Malays as a socio-economic and politically marginal community vis-à-vis the Chinese in Singapore. Within the prisons, this racially structured reality renders the Chinese inmates perceptive to the parallel between the economic marginality and ostracism experienced by Malay transvestites in prison and the socio-economic and political dominion of the Malays by the Chinese, of which the latter is imported from the broader Singaporean context. This subsequently influences the Chinese inmates to perpetuate an ethno-racial discourse that confirms and broadcasts the dominion of Malays by Chinese and the 'cultural inferiority of Malays to the Chinese' (Barr 2000) within and beyond the prison. The ethno-racial discourse exemplifies how the dysfunctional prison community reflects the processes of socio-economic marginalisation of Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese within the dysfunctional Singapore state. In the prisons, the racially structured reality of Malays as a socio-economically underdeveloped community which is rooted in larger society, shapes and dictates situations of race and ethnic contact, engenders beliefs about the nature of race and determines the social relations between heterosexual Malay and Chinese inmates as well as between heterosexual Malay inmates and Malay transvestites constructed on the basis of racial categories. Having served lengthy sentences in several Singapore prisons, Sheila's reflection on the social exclusion of transvestites by the Malay inmates and guards reflected the abovementioned argument succinctly:

> Malay guards and inmates insist that "fucking bapuk embarrass both themselves and Malay people". Transvestites get their heads stepped on by everybody in prison. Malay guards and inmates get mad when Chinese inmates blatantly say transvestites are a reminder of the sorry plight of Malays inside and outside the prison. Truth is Malays are not as rich as Chinese, Malay politicians are puppets of Chinese government and weak Malay gangs cannot rival established Chinese secret societies. Malays have this insecurity that the Chinese are better and we are scapegoats of that reality. Malay inmates are never held accountable by Malay guards if they chastise or thrash us. Malay inmates and guards are in cahoots to make prison hell for us transvestites.

As suggested in the excerpt above, the verbal abuse of Malay transvestites marked by labelling them 'bapuk' is an elicited reaction to the discourse of ethno-racialisation,

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[1]   Ever since Singapore's independence in 1965 and especially since the 1980s, minority ethnic Malays have been subjected to additional scrutiny in the republic's defence policy. The government's rationale has been that in a conflict with Singapore's predominantly Malay neighbouring countries (Malaysia in particular) it would be very difficult for Singapore Malay soldiers to be scrupulously loyal and patriotic to Singapore. Given the importance of the issue, Lee Kuan Yew (and a few cabinet ministers) held a dialogue with Malay leaders in March 2001. See *The Sunday Times* (Singapore), 11 March 2001, pp34-35.

perpetuated by the heterosexual Chinese inmates. 'Bapuk' is a derogatory Malay term that does not recognise the psyche of transvestites as 'men trapped in women's bodies' but instead essentialises transvestites as 'nuts, sluts and perverts' (Ramli 1991). Within the prisons, Chinese inmates appropriate the marginality of 'Malay transvestites' in order to confirm the networks of marginalisation which suppress Malay culture in Singapore society and to reinforce the widespread spoilt identity of Malays as racially inferior to the Chinese. Through the ethno-racial discourse, the racialised spoilt images of Malays as marginal crosses over into the prison boundary and becomes entrenched. This then ensues in a solidarity between Malay inmates and prison personnel to mistreat the Malay transvestites who are perceived as triggering and compounding the spoilt identity of Malays. As Natra, the representative who was in charge of airing out the grievances of the 'catamite' housing unit, affirmed:

> Malay inmates and guards claim that we bapuk give the Chinese a reason to jeer at Malays. Because of us, Chinese people say Malays, whether inside or outside prison, are always below Chinese. This way of thinking justifies the cruelty Malay inmates and guards perpetrate against us. Once this Malay guard said he had a job to give me. He said I was to clean a store-room. When we got into the room, he locked the door, took his baton and hit my breasts. When I slumped on the floor, he kicked my stomach. Then he dragged me up, bends me over a table, pulled down my shorts and pushed his baton inside me. I cried out when he pushed his baton deep inside me which made him slam my face into the table. My teeth cut into my lower lip, which began to bleed. All the while this guard kept saying that this was what I deserved for embarrassing the Malay community. He said he needed to toughen me up so I would start behaving like a proper Malay man.

The antagonistic reaction of Malay inmates and guards towards Malay transvestites as I shall elucidate in the following sections is inseparable from and influenced by the religious, social, ethnic and gender dynamics that exists within the broader context of Singapore society. The abovementioned observation has necessitated the introduction of a new concept – prison of society. Prison of society criticises as ideological the assumption of prison in society concept that the 'mortification of self' (Goffman 1961) resulting from entry into a 'people-processing institution' produces two homogeneous groups of people, namely prison personnel and inmates. Mortification of self which suggests that upon entry into the prison, it is theoretically possible for inmates and prison personnel to shed their social identities in larger society, which are based on race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality in order to fulfill their specific roles as custodians of control and docile bodies respectively, is incongruent with the empirical reality observable in the Singapore prisons. The assumption that 'prison culture' (Clemmer 1958) is reducible to instrumental actions by inmates in response to the deprivations of imprisonment is theoretically sterile since it formats a core set of assumptions and expectations about prisons whose meaning do not necessarily originate in prison or with prisoners. Schutz, through his distinction between *Weil* and *Wozu motive,* and Weber, through his distinction between instrumental and axiological rationality, have stressed that action is not always instrumental, which the concept of prison of society aims to explore. Prison of society asserts that the complexities of inmate culture and social structure could be better appreciated by drawing upon a long tradition of interpretive sociological theory and ethnographic research that connects human action and inter-subjective meanings. Conceptually, prison of society does not view the prison as an exact copy or a representative model of larger society. Nevertheless, prison of society appreciates that certain social processes and dynamics, whether related to race, religion or gender existing in the larger society are observable within the prison institution. It also concedes that changes in these processes and dynamics could affect the prison community and culture. Such a consideration is based on studies that have empirically shown the boundaries of most

prisons to be porous as guards collude with prisoners, ideas and objects move in and out of confinement, and more generally, social, ethnic and gender dynamics existing in larger society are replicated inside the prison, thus undermining the notion of the social exclusion of prison community and prison culture from larger society (Dikotter & Brown 2007).

Contextualising Transvestism and the Consequent Marginalisation of Male Transvestites in Singapore's Male Penal Institutions

The parallel drawn between the socio-economic marginality Malay transvestites in prison and Malays in Singapore constitute the foundation for Chinese inmates to initiate an ethno-racial discourse. Malay transvestites are accordingly held responsible by Malay inmates and guards for triggering the ethno-racial discourse that effectively exacerbates the spoilt identity of Malays as a 'weak race, poor in money, poor in education, poor in intellectual equipment and moral qualities' (Rahim 1998). This consequently lead Malay inmates and guards to target Malay transvestites for abusive and discriminatory treatment. The perception that the marginality of Malay transvestites in prison is an extension of the marginality of Malays in Singapore among Chinese inmates is contingent upon two factors. The first is the over-representation of Malays in the prison's transvestite population. Second and more importantly is the parallel drawn between the transvestites' structural marginality within the prison vis-à-vis the majority heterosexual prison population and that of the socio-economic and political marginality of Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese majority in Singapore society. In this section, I will conceptualise the 'socio-economic marginality' experienced by the transvestite population and analyse the structural reasons for their marginalisation within the prisons.

As an institution that subscribes to the normative construction of sex, gender and sexuality, the management of inmates and the rehabilitative efforts within the prison promulgates activities that cater to individuals who are either 'male', 'masculine' and 'heterosexual' or 'female', 'feminine' and 'heterosexual'. Research pertaining to the prison community have generally developed into two dichotomous categories – studies pertaining to the incarceration experience of *either* 'male', 'masculine', 'heterosexual' inmates (Clemmer 1958; Sykes 1958) *or* 'female', 'feminine', 'heterosexual' inmates (Giallombardo 1966). In order to enforce a mode of classifying inmates according to a cultural grid of intelligibly gendered, sexual, and embodied identity categories, male transvestites are incarcerated in the male prisons despite the incongruity between their sex and gender identity. For transvestites, incarceration constitutes an exercise where 'the notion of sex coerces the grouping together of anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations and pleasures in an artificial unity' (Foucault 1990:154). Despite their identification with femininity, male transvestites upon entry into the male prisons are forcibly subjected to a 'trimming of the personal front' (Goffman 1961) through the regimentation of clothing, haircut and dispossession of personal paraphernalia upon which the presentation of the gendered self is contingent. In line with the regimentation of clothing and hairstyle that are obligatory upon all male inmates, transvestites are issued white, short-sleeved tee shirts and blue shorts, without consideration for brassieres although most have had breast implants, and they are shaven bald, in contrast to female inmates whose hair length are maintained just below the ear. The 'trimming of the personal front' is an institutional attempt to forcibly 'masculinise' the male transvestites so as to effect the performance of gender in accordance with sex among the male transvestite population (Hanif 2005).

Comprehending the marginalisation of transvestites necessitates contextualising them as deviant bodies with respect to performing their feminine self and expressing their homosexuality within a coercive institution that functions according to the normative construction of sex, gender and sexuality. In order to manage their spoilt identities, as a result of having the incongruity of their sex, gender and sexuality exposed through the trimming of the personal front in the male prisons, transvestites depend on their bodies to influence the perception of the social audience with respect to, and sustain a consistent construction of, their gender and sexual identity. Precipitated by the special circumstance of being incarcerated in a male prison coupled with the trimming of the personal front, 'the axis of life or the crucial lines of interest in the life' (Strong 1943:565) of the transvestite population becomes centred on managing their spoilt identity by resisting their forcible masculinisation and performing their femininity. Conceptually, an axis of life should be viewed in terms of collective action, of relationships based on meanings of one's actions toward others and in which the individual has his interests defined, with reference to the hopes, problems, and goals of the group (Strong 1943:565). Because they constitute telescoped collective norms and aspirations, the axis of life becomes a controlling force that animates and initiates action. The penal phenomenon of incarcerated transvestites, characterised by being stripped of their feminine identity while simultaneously being subjected to the 'gaze' of the remaining 'male', 'masculine', 'heterosexual' prison population situates transvestites in a milieu where gender identification with a feminine persona is intensified. The experience of transvestites induce a reinterpretation of Goffman's sociology (1971) as not the study of the representation of the self in the presence of a social audience but rather the performance of the self, in this case gender and sexuality, through the medium of the socially interpreted body. Roza, a long-term prisoner convicted of embezzlement, explained:

> Outside we get to wear women's clothes, put on make-up, so that one look at us and people know we are women. But in here everybody have a cookie-cutter image, we wear the same blue short, white t-shirt and all of us are bald. So in prison we rely on our body movements to show we are feminine. We are attracted and want to attract men. I am a woman inside.

The socio-economic marginalisation of transvestites within the homosocial prison context is an effect of managing 'outsiders' (Becker 1963) to the normative construction of sex, gender and sexuality, who disrupt the prison's classification of inmates. The prison which functions optimally based on a segregation of the genders conceptualises transvestites who express their gendered and sexual self through the medium of the socially perceived body as doubly deviant. Transvestites in prison are doubly deviant, first, as inmates who have transgressed legally codified laws. Secondly, they are perceived as a threat to the social order in prison because their expression of a non-normative sexuality and gender can cause love rivalries within the homosocial prison context. Maintaining social order in prison necessitates the spatial segregation of the genders through the segregation of transvestites' bodies from the rest of the inmate population which then justifies the organisation of actions, sanctions and reactions against the doubly deviant. The prison's discursive essentialisation of the negative images of the transvestites justifies relegating them to a peripheral status in the male prison in the interest of social order. Chief S. of Tanah Merah Prison explained:

> Catamites can influence male inmates through sexual favours. They can flirt like women and instill jealousies between men and cause fights. Most catamites are prostitutes so they don't mind satisfying the sexual needs of the men. They threaten the order in prison and are a security threat. Segregation is the only way to manage them even if it means they don't work or are treated substandard.

The assumption that the integrity and continuity of the prison community and its normative order are contingent on gender segregation results in and justifies the marginalisation of transvestites from the prison economy, characterised by their exclusion from holding jobs in the prison. Within the prisons, the economic marginality of transvestites is marked by their exclusion from being employed as cookies,[2] tea-boys,[3] or workers in the assembly line workshops making plugs or tagging clothes. The economic marginalisation of transvestites simultaneously means that they are deprived of the income and privileges that employment within the prison entails. Employment is a privilege for two reasons. First, employment secures pecuniary benefits, specifically a weekly pay of 3 dollars and 50 cents for inmates who work a 'single shift' (half a day's work or four hours) and 7 dollars for inmates who work a 'long shift' (a whole day's work or eight hours). Inmates' salaries will be deposited in their personal account and returned to them upon their release. As part of their privilege, employed inmates are allowed to use their salaries to purchase 'canteen', or foodstuffs that are outside of prison regulation. Aside from tangible benefits, economic marginalisation indirectly deprives transvestites of the opportunities to upgrade their economic potential, such as by acquiring provision of skills training in information technology, attending computer and barber courses or to continue schooling, which could facilitate their chances of post-incarceration employment. Claudia claimed that transvestites were discriminated as a group because of their sexuality:

> Officers let us apply for the courses knowing they won't select us. Guards claim we are flirty so we must be segregated. They only have six catamites working in one workshop in this prison. Guards report that transvestites want to work only to get close to the men because transvestites are prostitutes. We are not selected to attend any courses and we are excluded from religious or rehabilitative counselling because there are male inmates in these classes and we have to be segregated from them. I'm locked up for almost 24 hours a day while waiting for five years to pass by. I wish I would just die.

Since deviants do not have rights but are rather the recipients of mercy (Liazos 1972), establishing transvestites as doubly deviant, in relation to performing femininity and aggressively pursuing sexual relations with heterosexual inmates that could threaten prison security, has justified the isolation of transvestites within the prison. Consequently, the transvestites' loss of liberty is a double one – first, by confinement to the institution and secondly, by confinement within the institution. Communication between transvestites and male inmates are strictly curbed under threat of isolation of both parties in the punishment cell or worse, a lengthening of the 'earliest date of release' (EDR) between three to 21 days, under the discretion of prison warders and superintendents. Labelling transvestites as doubly deviant becomes synonymous with the 'master status' (Lemert 1996) of the transvestite population that justifies their physical, psychological and emotional alienation, although this encroaches on their rights. To illustrate, 'yard time', a one-hour exercise time which constitutes the inmates' right to be taken out of their cells, becomes subject to the discretion of the prison officers. On numerous occasions, Lyna, a young inmate serving time for theft, articulated that:

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[2] Selected based on good behaviour, 'cookie' denotes inmates who are placed in charge of general maintenance around the prison. They usually perform odd-jobs, including sweeping the offices in prison like the records office, the meeting room, officers' rooms, clearing the rubbish, fetching inmates from the records office to interview rooms since all interviews with inmates conducted by visitors are conducted outside the housing unit. Generally they work in the prison offices, under the direct supervision and instruction of officers.

[3] Inmates who are tea-boys are a separate group from 'cookie'. Tea-boys wear a t-shirt with the word 'tea-boy' printed at the back of the t-shirt and they are confined within the sphere of the kitchen. Selected based on good behaviour, tea-boys perform duties in the kitchen, like cooking for the whole institution, serving drinks and food to officers and visitors and delivering meals to inmates' housing units.

> One hour yard becomes 20 minutes if there are men around. Heck, there are always men around because this is a male prison. These dogs, these guards always claim we trying to seduce the men so no yard. If we argue our rights we go punishment cell. Staff Sergeant M. says 'trouble-makers don't have rights'.

Ironically, the doubly deviant label attached to transvestites has generated two separate contexts where deviant acts of overt abusive and discriminatory treatment perpetrated against the transvestites by their labellers, both the heterosexual prison personnel and inmates, are condoned and encouraged. In this section, I have explored the transvestites' non-normative expression of gender and sexuality as a basis for their exclusion from participating in the prison economy and their isolation from the rest of the inmate population, which relegates them to a peripheral status within the formal prison administration. In the subsequent section, I shall explore how the marginality of Malay transvestites parallels the plight of Malays in the ostensibly meritocratic and multi-racial oasis of Singapore, thus triggering the ethno-racial discourse. The ethno-racial discourse initiated by the Chinese inmates that rationalise the socially disadvantaged position of Malays to be a result of their 'inherently negative values and generally moribund attitudes' (Rahim 1998) provoke the Malay inmates and guards to perpetrate abuse against the Malay transvestites.

Ethno-racialisation: Transvestites' Marginality as Malay Marginality

The official and ideological discourse of the prison has framed the marginalisation of transvestites as a consequence of the latter's performance of femininity and predisposition towards homosexuality, which is devoid of racial undertones. The Chinese inmates' discursive interpretation of the marginality of Malay transvestites in prison, however, does not reflect this official rhetoric. Instead, Chinese inmates interpret the marginality of Malay transvestites through a lens that racialises the Malays as a socio-economic and politically marginalised 'race'. To unravel the root of the ethno-racial discourse triggered among the Chinese inmates, it is imperative to invoke the concept of prison of society. The conspicuous parallel between the marginalisation of Malay transvestites vis-à-vis the remaining inmate population (mainly Chinese) and the socio-economically and politically marginalised status of Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in Singapore society provokes 'race consciousness'. This invariably elicits a 'discourse of racialisation' with respect to the inherent traits of the Malay 'race'. Race consciousness refers to the myriad of factors that are capable of both influencing an individual's conception of himself as well as his status in the community and enforcing social distance from the 'other' (Park 2000). Factors which could trigger race consciousness include 'stereotypic behavioural traits ascribed to a particular race, essentialised ethnic or cultural differences that maintain in-group identification, the status ranking of a particular race in a social system relative to the position of 'others' reflected in terms of criteria like education, income, or a permanent physical trait that increases an individual's visibility and makes more obvious his identity with a particular ethnic or genetic group' (Goldberg 1992). In the Singaporean context, the socio-economic marginality that visibly characterises Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese both historically and in the contemporary era is consequently able to trigger race consciousness among both the Chinese and Malay population about who is Malay and what typifies Malayness as Natra succinctly illuminated:

> Members of our race like to call us bapuk, treat us like enemies. They say we transvestites cause the Malay community to lose its pride and prestige. In prison we don't work, we are isolated and powerless even if we are bullied. Malay guards and inmates get angry because apparently

transvestites prove Malays are undermined by Chinese everywhere. Everywhere Maju C (Chinese) inmates are the cookie, hold the high posts, even in government Malays are obedient and subordinate to Chinese. Chinese inmates look at transvestites and say that Malays are like that, weak, inside or outside prison.

The 'Malay Problem', synonymous with economic backwardness and social problems such as drug addiction, broken families and delinquent youths, has been a feature of Singapore politics ever since its inception, a debate which has been dominated and sustained by scholars as well as the political elites. Singapore's emphasis on meritocracy for vertical mobility, however, consequently renders the culture-deficit hypothesis as being dominant in explaining the Malay Problem (Mutalib 2005). The cultural deficit thesis underlines the socio-economic marginality of ethnic Malay minorities as a result of their inept cultural values and attitudes, including being afflicted by inertia, complacency, unstable family units and an overwhelming desire for immediate gratification. To expose the ideology of the cultural-deficit thesis, Rahim (1998) demonstrates the salience of historical, ideological and institutional factors in contributing towards the socio-economic marginality of the Malay community. While multiracialism at the cultural level is encouraged in Singapore, the empirical evidence presented by Rahim suggests that multiracialism and meritocracy at the institutional level are questionable. Government policies such as the population policies based on maintaining the racial balance, educational programs such as the Special Assistance Programme (SAP) and the exclusion of Malays from 'sensitive' units in the SAF and police force illustrate the dereliction of the multiracial and meritocracy ideals in Singapore. Following earlier authors, Rahim (1998) asserts that the government's negative attitude towards earlier calls in the 1960s and 1970s by Malay elites and key community leaders to assist in the educational uplifting of the Malay community has directly disadvantaged the Malays. The government's lack of receptivity to the Malays' demand for educational assistance has been attributed to 'the receiving rather than striving philosophy it embodied that is reminiscent of their demands to redress ethnic economic imbalances when Singapore was part of Malaysia, the Sino-Malay racial riots and the distrust between the government and the Malays at a time when Malays were transiting from majority to minority status' (Tan 1995:344-345). Nevertheless Malay elites and key community leaders could not push for Malay interests without risking the loss of whatever input channels they possessed. Rahim (1998) strongly advocates the idea that the marginality of Malay community is due to the institutional and structural factors in the political and educational system, rather than the cultural deficit thesis championed by the dominant ethnic Chinese community.

Deciphering the logic behind the discourse of ethno-racialising the marginality of Malay transvestites as Malay marginality requires bringing the prison of society concept to the forefront and recognising Malays and Chinese as 'politicised' prisoners, as opposed to 'political' prisoners. Political prisoners are defined as 'prisoners who have been incarcerated for a variety of politically motivated acts' (Berkman & Blunk 2001). On the other hand, of more pertinence within the context of this article, 'politicised' prisoners allude to prisoners whose phenomenological definition and interpretation of any empirical phenomenon in prison is done in reference to themselves as ethno-racialised members of a particular race and as members of a particular race who ethno-racialises the 'other'. 'Politicised' prisoners embark on 'reality construction', a process through which human actors make their experiences of the world around them orderly and understandable (Berger & Luckmann 1966:112).

The ethno-racial discourse perpetuated by the Chinese inmates reflects the prevalent rhetoric of the Malay Problem that has its roots in the constant demonising and the moral

panic caused by the Malay Problem, which may prove lucrative to the state and society at large (Hill 2002:21-24). This is compounded by the Singapore government's concept of 'multiracialism' that fails to distinguish between race and ethnicity, often using them interchangeably. In Singapore, multiracialism has translated to the overall pervasiveness of the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) model where the ethnicity of each 'race' is not only assumed to be unique and particularistic, but also serves an ascriptive function in Singapore society (Hill & Lian 1995; cf Benjamin 1976). By engaging in a celebration of the deviant, in this case the Malays, the state and its agents successfully consolidate the moral boundaries and the social norms of the ethnic Chinese majority, whose 'culture, nature, heredity and organisational strengths are believed to be indispensable to Singapore's economic performance and the political backdrop which makes that economic performance possible' (Barr 2000). By constantly reminding the national audience that the Malay community is a 'soft community where high standards or difficult goals are not thought to be worth the effort', such a pejorative image is not only maintained but continues to be perpetuated (Nasir 2007). These public executions demarcate the 'us' versus 'them' discourse and elucidate the approved kinds of behaviour for society to tread. By evoking the debate of the Malay problem from time to time, Singapore society as a whole continues to subscribe the ideological and social perceptions of Malays as 'culturally and genetically inferior' compared to the Chinese. In this way, Malays function as the principal difference that endorses the socio-economic and political dominance of the ethnic Chinese majority within Singapore. As reflected by the ethno-racial discourse, Singaporeans (inmates included) have come to accept the CMIO model which is essentially racial, as a reference point in their relations with the state if not in their everyday lives in relation to other ethnic groups (Lian 2006).

Gendering of the Malay 'Race' and Racialisation of Sexuality: Managing the Spoilt Identity of the Malay 'Race'

The marginality of transvestites vis-à-vis those who subscribe to the normative construction of sex, gender and sexuality both within the prison context and in the milieu of Singapore society is akin to the marginalised position of Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in Singapore society. Transvestites, whether in prison or broader Singapore society, constitute a marginalised population. Singapore continues to retain its antiquated 19th-century anti-homosexual laws inherited from the British colonialists. Legally, homosexual Singaporeans are barred from organising an advocacy group to either educate the public or lobby for legal reforms exemplified by the unsuccessful bids by Singapore's first homosexual support group, People Like Us (PLU) in 1997 and 2003, to register itself as a society. As recent as August 2004, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has maintained that Singapore's injunction against organised homosexual activism is consistent with its dominant culture of heterosexuality that aims to preserve 'Asian values' and 'the integrity of the nuclear family that procreates' while distancing the incipience of 'Western decadence' as a result of globalisation.

The socio-economic alienation of Malay transvestites relative to the rest of the inmate population is analogous to the socio-economic lag of Malays relative to the Chinese in larger society. This alienation facilitates imputing the visible essentialised traits of the transvestites upon the Malay 'race'. The above parallel has induced the 'ethno-racialisation' of the Malay 'race' as a feminine race. Adopting a 'relational perspective' of race and ethnic relations, the discursive 'gendering of the Malay race' as feminine, to be read as 'weak,

marginalised and subordinate' serves to exacerbate the spoilt identity (Goffman 1971) of the Malay 'race'. This is in opposition to the Chinese race which is conceptualised as 'masculine', to be read 'strong and superior'. The 'relational perspective' of race and ethnic relations has been derived from an extension and modification of Goffman's work on the sociology of stigma. Developed within the parameters of the prison, Goffman's concept of spoilt identity referring to those with attributes that lead them to be 'reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one', exclusively refers to inmates who were deprived of resources to 'present their unique selves'. This has severely limited the implications of the concept of spoilt identity for understanding the process of racialisation and inter-ethnic dynamics. The ethno-racial discourse reflects 'a political and ideological process by which particular populations are identified by direct or indirect reference to their real or imagined phenotypical characteristics in such a way as to suggest that the population can only be understood as a supposedly biological unity' (Cashmore 1988:246). The ethno-racial discourse is reminiscent of the concept of spoilt identity, suggesting that the latter is applicable in making sense of a collective identity and not necessarily limited to individual identity. The discursive gendering of the Malay race results from the stigma, held by the Chinese, of Malays as socio-economically marginal vis-à-vis the Chinese in Singapore society. This then forms the basis of the 'working consensus' upon which inter-ethnic interactions are founded. Regardless of the context in which Chinese and Malays find themselves, the culture of marginality associated with the Malays have been internalised by society at large and will not rapidly disappear with a change in situation. The mutual acceptance of identities is rendered the foundation of interaction with the 'orientational other', referring to 'the others in communication with whom an individual's or a group's identity is basically sustained and/or changed' (Kuhn 1967). To illustrate, Stimpfl (2006) describes how the professional middle class Malays, being socially and economically distant from the general Malay community and being ethnically different from the non-Malay community, suffer from a social phenomenon of 'double alienation'. The profound level of alienation has rendered the Malay middle class socially vulnerable and susceptible towards uncritically accepting the cultural deficit thesis which gratifies their ego for having extricated themselves from the negative cultural attributes afflicting the Malay community.

Aside from the marginality of Malay transvestites, the position of Malays as prison guards vis-à-vis the Chinese as prison officers further embeds the racialisation of Malays as subordinate to the Chinese. The position of prison guards, mostly occupied by Malays and Indians, reflects a structurally powerless position that merely takes orders from high-ranking Chinese officers who are referred to as 'Maju Cina' or progressive Chinese in the prison argot. Additionally, prison argot refers to Malay and Indian prison guards as 'anjing Cina' or 'dogs belonging to the Chinese'. Malay guards who occupy a similar structurally disempowered positions vis-à-vis the Chinese officers, as Malay transvestites in relation to the remaining inmate population, reinforced the ethno-racial discourse that Malays are culturally inferior to the Chinese. Contrarily, Chinese who are socio-economically and politically dominant in larger society do not exhibit an inferiority complex with regards to their ethnicity when dealing with Chinese transvestites. Ethnic Chinese transvestites in prison are a minority. However, Chinese transvestites are not able to distort entrenched racialisation of what it means to be 'Chinese' in spite of this marginality. Natra succinctly asserted:

> Chinese transvestites are not harassed by members of their race. Chinese, unlike Malays, have proved their strength in prison and outside. Chinese transvestites cannot change the fact that Maju C is still tops. In here all the leaders of secret societies are Chinese, Malays are only soldiers. Most prison officers, intelligence officers are Chinese, Malays are guards. Chinese officers have decision-making powers while Malay guards open and close the gates.

> Government leaders and people with high posts who are running Singapore are all Chinese. The one or two Malays in the government are puppets to the Chinese.

The over-representation of Malays as transvestites coupled with the feminisation of the Malay 'race' induce the Chinese inmates to racialise Malay men as being inherently predisposed towards (homo)-sexuality. Gender is an integral dimension in defining a heterosexual sex act. The definition of heterosexual intercourse involves a 'masculine part (man) who plays a dominant role by penetrating during intercourse and a feminine part (woman) who plays a subordinate role by being penetrated during intercourse' (Schwartz & Rutter 1998). The femininity of transvestites highlights their role as the 'feminine' counterpart who is penetrated during the sex act. The over-representation of Malays as transvestites consequently elicits offensive assertions from the Chinese inmates that 'Malay men are closet catamite', which in turn contributes to the spoilt identity of Malay men. Malay men are identified with a feminine persona and discursively ethno-racialised as embodying feminine qualities like 'weakness' and 'softness' as opposed to the 'agressiveness' and masculinity of Chinese men. Sheila stated:

> Once during yard, a Chinese inmate exclaimed, "why does the Malay race have a lot of bapuk?" Another Chinese answered, 'Malay men are weak, all closet catamite.' This happened in front of me, some Malay inmates and guards. Infuriated, the Malay guard told the Malay inmates I embarrassed all Malay men. The guard told the inmates to flatten my chest and make me a man. They kept punching my breast to destroy my implants.

The ethno-racial discourse of gendering the Malay 'race' and racialising the sexuality of Malay men that entrenches the spoilt identity of Malays prompted the harsh treatment of Malay transvestites by the Malay inmates and guards. Faris (1937) argues that 'if there is a group consciousness, a feeling of we, then undoubtedly there will be sanctions directed against members of the same group which manifest attitudes that are deviant' because they amplify the deviant status of the members within the same community. In prison, Malay inmates and guards employ a religious rhetoric, where Malay identity is synonymous with Islam, to obstruct the in-group identification of transvestites as Malays. In Singapore, Malays are overwhelmingly Muslims and the forbidding of homosexuality in Islam is an attempt by Malay inmates and guards to 'other' the transvestites by highlighting transvestism as incongruent with the Malay-Muslim identity. This constitutes an effort to resist the racialisation of Malay men as homosexuals and the Malay 'race' as feminine. By othering the Malay transvestites as objects to be disciplined, the overt discrimination, and abuse that are perpetrated against the former by Malay inmates and guards seem justifiable. Pearl, a fifth time offender, described the othering of transvestites:

> They will say it's not bad enough we are criminals, but we have to be the outcast in prison. Transvestites put the Malay community to shame. Bapuks are not Malays because we are not Muslims. God rained fire and stones on transvestites.

Conclusion

In the course of explaining the solidarity between Malay inmates and guards in perpetrating abusive and discriminatory treatment towards Malay transvestites, this article has delved into Singapore's history and ethnic demography, the ethnic Malay minority's lagging socio-economic development and modernisation vis-à-vis the ethnic Chinese majority, geo-politics and the ideology and strategic choices of the state's political elite and their implications for inter-ethnic interactions between Malays and Chinese. To grasp the antagonism of Malay inmates and guards towards Malay transvestites, the context within

which the ethnic Malay minorities operate need to be appreciated. In Singapore the strategic choices and other decisions made by the state has induced the socio-economic and political marginalisation of Malays in relation to the Chinese. Singapore's emphasis on meritocracy and multiracialism, however, has directed the blame for the Malays' socio-economic underdevelopment away from official state policy and towards inherent issues within the community. Multiracialism in Singapore has consequently induced Malays and Chinese to be highly conscious of their 'race' which is reflected in the ethno-racial discourse perpetuated by Chinese inmates as well as the solidarity of Malay inmates and guards towards the ethno-racial discourse that depreciates the Malay 'race', as well as racialises the sexuality of Malay men as homosexuals. The antagonism of Malay inmates and guards is consequently directed at Malay transvestites who are perceived to trigger and exacerbate the spoilt identities of Malays.

   While the processes of marginalisation occurring in larger society have typically preceded analysis of phenomenon occurring within the prison, the novelty of this article lies in the suggestion that the empirical observations within the prison could elaborate on the processes of social exclusion occurring in Singapore society. An analysis of the inter-ethnic interactions between Chinese inmates and Malay inmates and guards, and the intra-ethnic interactions between Malay inmates and guards and Malay transvestites have shed light on the processes of economic, political and cultural exclusion experienced by ethnic Malays and transvestites in Singapore. Social processes within the prison are not canonical products of the pains of imprisonment. Instead, as the Singaporean case has shown, empirical observations in prison reflects on the reality of social exclusion, and the social dynamics including race and ethnic relations, political relations, gender relations and class relations occurring within larger society. By shifting my conceptual focus from 'prison in society' to 'prison of society', a new analytical dimension of informal inmate culture and social structure has been realised that suggests immense possibilities for prison literature.

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