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THEORISATIONS OF IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE: WAYS OF BEING MALAY, CHINESE AND INDIAN SCHOOLGIRLS IN A MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL
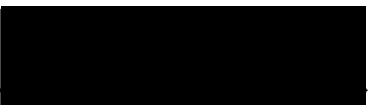
Cynthia Joseph BSc (Ed) (Honours), MEd (Universiti Sains Malaysia)

A thesis submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, Faculty of Educaton, Monash University
Victoria, Australia

January 2003

DECLARATION

I, Cynthia Joseph, hereby declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma of any university, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature of candidate: ██████████ ....

Date:...... *23 January 2003* ....

This research project was granted approval by the Standing Committee on Ethics in Research involving Humans of Monash University on 20 April 2000 (Project 2000/123).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My candidature has beer, an exciting and challenging journey intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. The academic and emotional support I have had, especially here in Australia in my Ph.D journey has been great.

The most important person throughout my Ph.D quest has been my supervisor, Dr. Georgina Tsolidis. It has been a great privilege to work under her supervision. I would like to extend very special and heart-felt thanks to her for her positive supervision - she was critical, encouraging and supportive. She has given of her time with extraordinary generosity, offering detailed and constructive criticisms on ideas, interpretations and thesis drafts. She provided me with the academic and emotional freedom in constructing this thesis while being critical and challenging every step of this journey. She was firm, yet there were always spaces where I could display my joy, frustrations and self-doubts (and at times even my craziness).

I am also very grateful to Associate Professor Lawrence Angus for his constructive criticism and feedback on the final draft of my thesis. He provided me with useful comments and suggestions during the discussions I have had with him at various stages of the PhD.

I am extremely grateful to my friend and colleague, Mrs. Rosemary Viete for all her assistance, encouragement and support during my PhD candidature. She has always been there to listen and share in my happy and funny times as well frustrations and problems - both academic and personal. I wish to say a special thank you for her time and comments spent on the final draft of my thesis. I wish her much success as she begins her own Ph.D journey.

I would like to thank special friends here in Australia and overseas who believed in me and encouraged me with their positive spirit and love throughout this journey of mine from the beginning - Dr. Faridah Haron, Dr. Gail Paasse, Ms. Erlenawati, Dr. Jennifer McKay, Dr. Wong Soak Koon, Julie Harrington and Dr. Jose Alonso, Katrina Markwick, Gerry Benjamin.

I also wish to acknowledge friends and colleagues who have been a great support to me at various stages of my study - Dr. R. Santhiram and Mrs Vasantha Santhiram, Professor Fazal Rizvi, Dr. Nadine Dolby, Pat Mehegan and David. I am also grateful to the many other friends and colleagues who were in one way or another part of this journey of mine.

! would like to thank the members of the Feminist reading group and Ph.D seminar group organised by Dr. Georgina Tsolidis at the Faculty of Education, Monash University for their critical discussions and good cheer.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father,
Mr. Joseph Jeganathan
who taught me the importance of both academic education and the wisdom gained
from life's experiences

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a theoretical framework of feminism of difference, this study investigates differences and similarities in personal and collective identities in ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls within the context of schooling as an institutional practice. The notion of resistance, emphasising its sociopolitical significance, is used as an analytical tool to understand the patterning between ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls, educational outcomes, schooling and the wider Malaysian society.

Fifteen Malay, ten Chinese and nine Indian 16 year old schoolgirls from an urban girls' secondary school in the state of Penang in Malaysia were involved in the study. The research methods used included free-format essays on experiences of being a girl and schooling, individual and group interviews, my observations in and out of school, informal discussions with teachers and electronic communication.

My own positionings as a Malaysian~Indian~Christian female educator and researcher are interrogated as part of this research in order to bring to light how these affect the direction and outcome of the research.

On the basis of this research I conclude that ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls are multiple, shifting and contradictory, with ethnicity being the main social dimension. Differences within and between the ethnic categories emerged from the girls' negotiations with the discourses of schooling, gender and the politics of ethnic identification. Two terms emerged as particularly significant from the interviews with the girls - the 'Western' girl and the 'traditional' girl. These girls used 'Western' girl to describe those who wore revealing clothes, had social

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interactions with boys, were able to talk about sex, were fluent in English, and watched and read Western media materials. The 'traditional' girl represented the essentialised girl from a particular ethnic group. For these girls, the 'traditional' Malay girl was inextricably linked to Islam through markers such as the *tudung, aurat,* praying, fasting, Koran and social interactions with boys. The 'traditional' Chinese girl was described in relation to Chinese culture to mean watching Chinese movies, speaking Chinese dialects, working hard, appreciating the importance of money and having *kiasu* attitudes and behaviour, and being materialistic. The 'traditional' Indian girl was intertwined with markers such as the *pottu,* long hair, clothes that are non-revealing, social interactions with boys and Indian traditions and customs specified for females.

In relation to schooling, being 'Western' and having *kiasu* attitudes was linked with very high grades and active resistance to schooling and the politics of ethnic identification. Being 'traditional' girls was linked with low grades, compliance to school rules and authority, and passive resistance to school. A combination of more 'Western' than 'traditional' characteristics in ways of being girls was linked to rebellious behaviour in school and active resistance to discourses of schooling and traditional constructions of gender. The main locus of oppression for this group of Malaysian schoolgirls was patriarchy as this was manifested in the interplay of gender and ethnicity through the discourses of gender, schooling and the politics of ethnic identification. The girls, in constructing their self-identifications within the schooling site, display active and passive resistance in negotiating these competing discourses.

The findings of this study reiterate the need to investigate the interplay of multiple social dimensions in the notion of resistance.

Chapter One

Introduction: Crafting the thesis

1.1 Introduction

Shariza is a 16 year-old Malaysian-Malay-Muslim girl. She is a school prefect and

also does karate. She writes:

> Hmmra.,.1 don't know what to write...as a girl, I have to be very good
> courteous...I am not very courteous like the old Malay girL.but sometimes I
> try to be very polite and talk very courteously, I can do that but sometimes I
> forgot about it...so I think I am not being myself, Shariza (Shariza of 4
> Science A).

Fong Ling, a 16 year-old Malaysian-Chinese-Buddhist girl who has a motorbike and

plays the Chinese harp writes:

> Describe yourself as a girL.now that is something...I mean I never really
> stop and think about it...well as a teenager in this age I am really busy all the
> time, either with school work or personal stuff...but then as a Form Four
> student in Malaysia, you do really have loads and loads of work...the very,
> very important exam end of next year really stresses us out... so most of the
> time I just simply forget about it and concentrate on now (Fong Ling of 4
> Science A).

Priya, a 16 year-old Malaysian-Indian-Catholic girl, is also a school prefect. She

describes herself briefly in an essay:

> Well, like all other girls, I look the same...but my life is not the samc.after
> 16 years of experience, I will say life for an Indian girl like me is hard and
> horrible...the main situation which most girls go through - 'NO FREEDOM'
> (Priya of 4 Science A).

These brief excerpts from the seven months of fieldwork with 16 year-old Malaysian

schoolgirls set the scene for this first chapter. These excerpts from Shariza, Ling and

Priya's self-inscriptions on being a girl illustrate contradictory locations as they

juggle multiple personal and social roles within the realm of girlhood. Their self-

inscriptions indicate that they are located within multiple subject positions: teenage

girl, ethnic identity and schoolgirl. Shariza, who does karate, on the one hand feels

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that she has to emulate her notion of a traditional Malay girl in being good, polite and courteous yet she forgets at times. Priya emphasises the fact that being an Indian girl is tough and in the same instance identifies with other teenage girls who are dealing with the freedom issue. Fong Ling places much emphasis on her studies at the moment of writing and tries to forget all else. Gender, ethnicity and schooling articulate in these girls' brief representations of themselves. I am interested in finding out how ethnicity comes into play in these girls' self-identifications and linking this to the role of schooling in this thesis.

The principal research question in this study is: How do the differences and similarities in ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls affect these girls' academic success in this particular schooling site? Leading on from this major research question are the following more specific research questions. What are the patternings between ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls and their educational outcomes? What are the girls' essentialised understandings of the Malay, Chinese and Indian girl? How do they see themselves in relation to these essentialised understandings? What are the discourses this group of Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls engage in as they construct their self-identifications within this schooling site? How do these girls relate to these discourses in constructing their self-identifications within the school as a significant institutional practice? What is the relationship between ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian girls, schooling and the wider Malaysian society? These research questions will be elaborated in detail in section 1.3, which addresses the research issues of the study.

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1.2 Setting the context of the research - Malaysia

In this thesis, I adopt a theoretical and methodological framework based on feminism of difference (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1986, 1990; Mirza, 1997; Mohanty, 1992; Spivak, 1988, 1993; Tsolidis, 1996, 2001; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997) in examining ways of being Malaysian schoolgirls. The terms 'feminist' and 'feminism' are problematic and contentious and I will address this further on in this chapter.

This thesis is contextually situated within contemporary Malaysia in terms of the research participants, the researcher and the research site. The research participants are 16 year old Form Four Malaysian schoolgirls from the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia; Malays, Chinese and Indians. As the researcher, I am a Malaysian-Indian-Christian female educator. The seven-month fieldwork was conducted in an urban girls' secondary school in Penang.

I provide a brief overview of contemporary postcolonial Malaysia so as to contextualise my thesis. The term "postcolonial" is used here to indicate the post-independence period of Malaysia following the end of the era of British colonisation in 1957. I also use "postcolonial" as do Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1995), to refer to all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day. The ethnic make-up of present day Malaysia, as well as the social and economic differences within and between the ethnic groups, are the result of the colonial era (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Daud, 1999; Maheswari & Santhiram, 2000, Mariappan, 1996). This will be further addressed in Chapter Two on Contemporary Malaysia.

Ethnicity and religion are important social markers in Malaysian society (Lee, 2000; Mariappan, 1996; Saravanamuttu, 1994, 2001; Wong, 2001a). Saravanamuttu (2001) captures the importance of ethnicity in Malaysia thus:

> The trichotomy of Malays, Chinese and Indians has been the defining characteristic of the polity and has coloured the way politics and social life has been conducted throughout Malaysia (Saravanamuttu, 2001 p.99).

The official public and political discourse on identity in Malaysian society categorises each Malaysian as either *Bumiputera,* Chinese, Indian or Others. The concept of discourse as developed in the work of Foucault is a historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs (Scott, 1990). Discourse is contained and expressed in organisations and institutions as well as in words (Weedon, 1997). Discourses are always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases, for example in education, social welfare, medicine, the law and the organisation of family and work (Weedon, 1997).

As it does in other countries, the official ethnic labeling determines certain rights and privileges within Malaysian society. The *Bumiputeras* are Malays and other indigenous people who constitute 67.3% of the society (Malaysia, 2001). This group has indigenous status and their status guarantees attendant privileges. The Malays, who comprise 80% of the *Bumiputera* category, are the largest ethnic group, exercising political dominance and monopolising the public and government sector. All Malays are Muslims and speak Malay, which, despite differences among spoken dialects, is a common language in its standard and written form. This standard form of Malay is the official and national language of the country.

Malaysia is not an Islamic state but Islam is the official religion of the state. Islam is the most important factor in Malay identity (Gomes, 1999) and a significant

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social, political and ideological force influencing the Malays (Saravanamuttu, 2001; Omar, 1996). A significant minority of Indians and Chinese are Muslims.

The Chinese and the Indians constitute 24.5% and 7.2% of the Malaysian population respectively (Malaysia, 2001). There is much heterogeneity among the Chinese and Indians along religious, linguistic and cultural lines. The Chinese, a significant minority, monopolise the private or corporate business sector having had the historical experience of capital accumulations (Gomez, 1999; Phang, 2000). The Indians lag behind economically, educationally and socially in comparison to the Malays and Chinese (Muzaffar, 1993; Santhiram, 1999).

These are the three major ethnic groups but minor groups include the Eurasians, Chinese Babas, Melakan Chitties and others who trace their ancestries through intermarriage and cultural diffusion from inter-ethnic interactions centuries ago. Another group is the *Orang Asli,* who are the aboriginal people of Peninsular Malaysia. Cultural plurality also exists in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.

As in any multiethnic nation, there is a power imbalance in terms of politics, economics and education between the various ethnic groups. These communal divisions have often resulted in contestation as well as encouraged consultation and compromise (Lee, 2000). In this respect there is tension but one that is controlled and tolerable as the needs of the two major ethnic groups, the Malays and the Chinese, are met in important ways. This imbalance of power leads to social, economic and educational inequality that results in differences between and within the ethnic groups in Malaysia. I use the term "politics of ethnic identification" to capture these

differences and power imbalances along the various social dimensions that are linked with the official political ethnic categories in Malaysia.

Being Malaysian is linked to the essentialistic and political ethnic categorisations of Malay, Chinese, Indian or Others. In stating this, I draw on Fuss's (1989) definition of essentialism as follows:

> A belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the "whatness' of a given entity...essentialism is typically defined in opposition to difference (Fuss, 1989 pxi-xii).

The ethnic categories of Malay, Chinese, Indians and Others are homogenised by the state's policies and are used strategically and politically by the Government through its economic, social and educational policies. These ethnic categories are also used politically by the ethnic collectivities themselves. However, there is also diversity in the daily experiences in ways of being Malays, Chinese, Indians or Others. Thus, differences here refer to not only the multiplicity and complexity in experiences of Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others. Differences here also refer to the differences between and within the ethnic groups that result in hierarchy and inequality along economic, educational and social dimensions.

Being Malaysian and more importantly Malay, Chinese, Indian and Others is not a simple matter of Government imposed labeling. It is more complicated and negotiated. Ways of being and knowing in Malaysia are multiple, shifting and contradictory as each Malaysian has to negotiate with these labels in their daily lives.

1.3 The research issues

In this thesis, I aim to identify and discuss the similarities and differences in personal and collective identities in ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls

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within the context of schooling as a significant institutional practice. Thirty-four sixteen-year old Malaysian schoolgirls were involved in my fieldwork. Fifteen Malay, ten Chinese and nine Indian girls from the highest and lowest achieving Form Four classes from Parkview Girls' Secondary School (a pseudonym) volunteered for my research study. My fieldwork materials comprised writings by these girls, interviews with them and observations of their interactions in and out of the classroom.

I present these girls' essentialised understandings of the Malay, Chinese and Indian girl. I next examine how these girls see themselves in relation to these essentialised understandings. I then examine how these similarities and differences within and between these ethnic groups of Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls affect their educational outcomes. Educational outcomes refer to these schoolgirls' academic performance in the school examinations. Most secondary schools in Malaysia, as is the case at Parkview Girls' Secondary School, use students' academic performance in examinations to stream students. In this school, girls are academically ranked in their class and in the overall form based on their examination results. This pedagogical practice of academic ranking, results in high and low achieving classes. In relation to the students, this results in academically successful and academically unsuccessful students. I am interested in examining the patternings between ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian girls and being academically successful or academically unsuccessful in these terms.

I use the notion of resistance (Giroux, 1983, 1997; McLaren, 1998) as an analytical tool to understand the patterning between ways of being Malay, Chinese

and Indian girls, schooling and the wider Malaysian society. Giroux (1983) posits that the notion of resistance considers the complex ways in which students mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint. Processes by which the school system reflects and sustains the d... :sant social practices and st'.ticiures that are found in a society divided by gender, ethnicity and class arc ^xdrmiiied through this notion of resistance. This will be addressed in depth in Chapteir Three in relation to gender, ethnicity and schooling.

Various researchers have theorised schooling as a significant site for processes of identification (Connell, 1993; Giroux, 1983, 1997; Haw, 1998; Luke & Gore, 1992; Mac An Ghail, 1994; McRobbie, 2000; Proweller, 1998; Shain, 2000; Walkerdine et al, 2001; Weiler, 2000; Tsolidis, 2001). Schools do not simply reflect society but are centrally involved in the production, re-articulation, selective dissemination and social appropriation of discourses which both contribute to and results from major social forces (Haw, 1998) like gender and ethnicity.

My research is located within the Malaysian context where there is an interplay of the politics of ethnic identification between the Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others. The processes of identification in Malaysian schools are complex because of the existence of the four distinct ethnic groups. This distinction is further complicated by the social and political meanings attached to the discourses that surround these ethnic groups. In this sense, my research is located within a non-Eurocentric context. Eurocentric refers to the tendency to see Europe as the center of the world and its culture as by definition superior to all others (Ma?ey, 20CG). In other words, European culture and history is taken to be the norm and all others to be

marginal. There is a need for Malaysian scholarship which allows for the exploration of multiple* shifting and contradictory identities located within specific Malaysian historical and social contexts. Such work by Malaysian researchers on Malaysian women, especially on schoolgirls is scarce, particularly research which explores issues of identity and ways of knowing and being a girl.

In the school involved in my research, about 77% of the teachers are Chinese, 22% Malays and 7 % Indians. The student population of the school in terms of ethnic distribution is 38.8% *Bumiputera,* 42.9 % Chinese, 15.5% Indians and 2.6% Others. Most of the top achievers are Chinese students. The ethnic demography of the school student population differs from the national demography which is 67.3% *Bumiputera,* 24.5% Chinese and 7.2% Indians (Malaysia, 2001). The girls at the research school are located within the broader societal politics of ethnic identification in Malaysia. How do these Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls construct their gender identity in the midst of the micro and macro ethnic politics within the school, the collectivities of which they are members and the nation-state?

These girls come to school with their own understandings of what it means to be a Malay, Chinese and Indian girl. The school places importance on excellence in terms of achievement academically as well as in co-curricular activities. However, schooling is not just about grades and achievement. It is dynamic in being part of the Malaysian society. The students, teachers and the teaching and learning processes are located within the interplay of gender, ethnicity and schooling in contemporary Malaysia.

1.4 Why these questions?

I did not approach this thesis in an attempt to be an objective researcher. This thesis is very much linked to my own personal journey and life experiences as a Malaysian-Indian-Catholic female educator. This question as to 'who I am' has been gnawing at me ever since I entered the Malaysian university as an undergraduate having left the secure and comfortable confines of family life. It was through the liberal arts subjects (like sociology of education, educational psychology) within the education component of my B.Sc (Ed) (Hons) degree program that I star; 3d to question my sense of self. Up until then I had taken science-based subjects in school. There were humanities subjects like languages, history, geography but the Malaysian system is based on a pedagogy of rote-learning not the Freierian notion of a collaborative, democratic and critical pedagogy (Wong, 2000). This system did not allow one to explore notions of self within the curriculum. We mostly just accepted the facts that the teacher taught and reproduced these in the examinations. The emphasis was on academic success defined in terms of examination grades. I went through a school system where I was academically positioned in the class and form. I was in the Science stream and in the top class during my secondary schooling days. These pedagogical practices are still prevalent in most Malaysian schools. Malaysian society as a whole places premium value on academic examination performance (Hassan, 1997). Students would have sat for four public examinations by the time they reach university level education.

Success and access to education is ethnicised in Malaysia. The best students within each ethnic group would gain access to public university education based on

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an ethnic quota. However, the academic achievement criteria used to establish the 'best students[5] is different for each ethnic group.

I still remember my father, who placed much emphasis on studies, advising my brother and me while at school to always emulate the Chinese on the basis of how good they were in their studies. This is exactly what we did, given that we were studious and very conscious of the importance of education for social mobility. We both turned out to be professionals. Very few Indians make it to that level in comparison to the Chinese and Malays. My brother is an engineer, one of the few Indians to have obtained a first class honors degree in Engineering, and I am one of the few Indian women to have become a university lecturer. My life during my childhood, teenage and University days was very much centered around studies. My brother and I used to socialise more with the Chinese students and stayed away from the Indian and Malay students as they were usually the academically weaker ones. Within the Malaysian context, ethnicity became more and more a prominent issue for me as I went from being an undergraduate to a Mathematics teacher (in a residential school where 95% of the students were Malays) and a part-time Masters student, to a university lecturer and now to a doctoral researcher.

My positionings within this research and how these positionings affect my relationship with the participants are important features of this research. I acknowledge that the character of the research is a product of my multiple positionings both in Malaysia and in Australia where I undertook my doctoral studies. I construct this thesis within an eclectic theoretical framework that draws upon concepts theorised by contemporary feminist theorists (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, *1996;* de

Lauretis, 1986, 1990; Mirza, 1997; Mohanty, 1992; Spivak, 1988, 1993; Tsolidis, 1996, 2001; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997) who work with identity and difference with interconnections to ethnicity. I refer here to feminists of difference in the recognition that they are not a homogeneous group. This eclectic group of feminists provide me with the conceptual and analytical tools vital in unpacking the interweaving between discourses of gender, ethnicity and institutional power in understanding ways of being and knowing as women/girls in contemporary postcolonial Malaysia. This will be explicated further in the following section of this chapter.

I also draw upon conceptualisations of Malaysian society (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Daud, 1999; Mariappan, 1996; Mohamad, 2001, Mohamad & Wong, 2001; Santhiram, 1999; Saravanamuttu, 2001) in this thesis. This will be further elaborated in Chapter Three on the theoretical framings of this thesis.

1.5 A "feminist" framework

I began this doctorate with the purpose of developing a Malaysian thesis. Other than the research participants, researcher and research site being Malaysian, I wanted a framework that would allow the Malaysian experiences and context to inform the theorising of ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. I did not want to adept a Eurocentric research framework that assumes the experiences of white, middle-class women as the norm in ways of being women.

Feminists of colour (Bannerji, 1992; Brah, 1996; hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1992; Narayan, 1997; Sheth & Handa, 1993; Spivak, 1988) have stated the need to understand in context the historical and material differences between all of us and the

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ways in which marginalising practices are played out. Sheth and Handa (1993) add that undertaking such a task necessitates that we begin from a feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist standpoint. This aMows for the experiences as well as the social, political and historical contexts of the research participants, research site and researcher to be used in theorising. This also avoids adopting a Eurocentric perspective in trying to understand the complexity of ways of being within different societal contexts. Moreover, it emphasises the role of the researcher in knowledge production and power dynamics of the research project.

The hegemonic discourse on women/girls from non-Western societies is still at times shaped by a Eurocentric feminist gaze which privileges Western notions of liberation and progress and portrays Third World women primarily as victims of ignorance and restrictive cultures and religions (Mohanty, 1991; Narayan, 1997). Eurocentric or western lenses constitute women's identifications with femininity, marriage, motherhood and domesticity as oppressive. Most often such analyses can fail to adequately recognise the complexity of cultures and societies. For example, a number of academic discourses (Mohamad, 1994, 2001; Omar, 1996) involving Malaysian women show this complexity. Omar (1996), in examining the social effects of Malaysian population policy on Malaysian women, states that researchers working within the Western tradition have projected their own ideas onto other societies they are working with and stresses that this is a form of denigration of other women.

A contemporary conceptualisation of Malaysian gendered self-identification, located within the framework of identity and difference with intersectionalities to

ethnicity, will provide such a representation. An exploration located within this epistemological framework would permit a complex understanding of such multifaceted identifications. Such an exploration would stress notions of meaning, power and agency within specific historical and social contexts.

A feminist framework of identity and difference allows for understandings of identity as multiple and shifting. It therefore allows for a multifaceted notion of Malaysian female adolescent identity which is sensitive to differences and similarities within and between categories such as Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others. Such a framework also allows for non-essentialist interpretations of Malaysian and more importantly Malay, Chinese, Indian and Others as opposed to essentialist interpretations premised on Eurocentric interpretations (including feminist) of Third World femaleness.

This understanding of female identity is premised on a notion of agency that is discursively produced, one that is located within the notion of multiple, shifting and contradictory identities. This allows for the notion that there are myriad ways of being a Malaysian teenage schoolgirl, one that allows for the exploration of the interplay of the agency~structure dyad. Such an approach also allows for the uniqueness and richness of contemporary Malaysian society to inform the representations of identity of Malaysian teenage schoolgirls.

Feminist theory of difference provides me with the theoretical and methodological tools to work with an overarching framework that allows both the experiences of the research participants and the researcher to play an important role in the theorising of ways of being and knowing. As Lather (1991) states:

> The search is for theory which grows out of context-embedded data, not in a
> way that automatically rejects a priori theory, but in a way that keeps
> preoccupations from distorting the logic of evidence (Lather, 1991 p.62).

Feminists of difference (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1984, 1986, 1990; Mirza, 1997; Mohanty, 1988, 1991; Spivak, 1990, 1993; Tsolidis, 1996,2001; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997) have challenged mainstream feminist theory that tends to reflect the viewpoints of white, middle-class women of North America and Western Europe. Mainstream feminist theory also posits gender as the essentialised core of the female identity. Feminist theorizations of difference (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1984, 1986, 1990; Mirza, 1997; Mohanty, 1988, 1991; Spivak, 1990, 1993; Tsolidis, 1996, 2001; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997) posit gender with interconnections to other social dimensions such as ethnicity and class that are central to understandings about ways of being a woman. Ways of being women are conceptualised as multiple, shifting and contradictory, and context specific.

While there is no such thing as 'the feminist perspective' or a univocal 'feminist theory' (Griffiths, 1995), various versions of feminism share certain common characteristics. Feminism is seen both as a social theory and also as practical politics (Ramazanoglu, 1989). As a social theory, feminism seeks to gain knowledge to understand women's lives and experiences in society. As Lugones and Spelman (1983) state:

> Feminist theories aren't just about what happens to the female population in
> any given society or across all societies, they are about the meaning of those
> experiences in the lives of women (Lugones & Spelman, 1983 p.576).

1.5.1 Experience as a source of knowledge

Within various feminisms, experience is used as a source of knowledge. Ramazanoglu and Holland (1999) conceptualise experience as our own consciousness

of our social existence. Experience provides understandings of our ways of being in this world. Experience as a source of knowledge for feminists has always been a problematic construct as it has assumed an essentialised understanding of gender (Harding, 1987; Mohanty, 1992; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 1999; Scott, 1992; Stone-Mediatore, 2000). White, middle-class women's lives were taken as representative of the female experience in much of the mainstream feminist literature in the 1960s and 1970s. However, this understanding has since been problematised and, just as "Western Women" or "White Women" cannot be constituted as an automatically unitary group, the category of "Third World Women" or any other category of women (for example Malaysian, Chinese or Indian woman) also cannot be defined as a essentialistic group (Mohanty, 1991). As Harding (1987) states, women come in different classes, races and cultures: there is no "woman" and no "woman's experience". There are multiple, shifting and often contradictory ways of being a woman as gender, ethnicity, race, class and other dimensions mediate with each other within specific historical and social contexts (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1986,1990; Mirza, 1997; Tsolidis, 1996; 2001; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

However, in order to achieve the emancipatory and liberatory goals of feminisms, there is a need to have collective experiences. The goal of 'feminisms' is to make theory, method and practice inseparable from each other especially in their aim to transform women's subordinate positions in institutions (Lather, 1991, 1992). The term feminisms is used to indicate that there is no single feminism but a range of feminisms (Alcoff & Porter, 1993). Thus, feminisms embrace two seemingly contradictory focal points. On the one hand there is the diversity of women's

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experiences as social dimensions come to play in specific contexts. On the other hand, there is the need for identifying a collective experience so as to improve the social conditions of women within a collective. Ramazanoglu and Holland (1999) link experience to contemporary feminist theories and practice. They state:

> To identify what should be transformed, we need appropriate theory: to produce appropriate theory we need knowledge of what is to be transformed, and so some sense of how subordination is experienced (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 1999 p.386).

Despite its problematic nature, many feminists (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; Mirza, 1997; Mohanty, 1991; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 1999; Scott, 1992; Tsolidis, 2001) understand experience as a necessary source of knowledge. It is only through experiences that we can add on and challenge the existing knowledge on the social order (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 1999) both at the macro-level of nations and societies and micro-level of the personal. And it is only through experiences that changes can occur. Scott (1992) very aptly emphasises the importance of experience in saying:

> Experience is not a word we can do without, although it is tempting given its usage to essentialise identity and reify the subject, to abandon it altogether. But experience is so much a part of everyday language so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion. It serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that is "unassailable" (Scott, 1992 p.37).

Scott (1992) adds that it is necessary to theorise experience despite its problematic nature. She states:

> Given the ubiquity of the term, it seems to me more useful to work with it, to analyse its operations and to redefine its meaning (Scott, 1992 p.37).

Mohanty (1992) also reiterates this point thus:

> Experience of the self which is often discontinuous and fragmented, must be historicized before it can be generalized into a collective vision...experience

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> must be historically interpreted and theorised if it is to become the basis of feminist solidarity and struggle, and it is this moment that an understanding of the politics of location proves crucial (Mohanty, 1992 p.88).

Joan Scott further adds that in analysing and redefining the meaning of experience, one should focus on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of 'experience'.

I turn to Brah (1996) as a way of solving this tension between the notion of experience as an essentialised collective experience and that of experience as diversity of ways in being women. Brah explains:

> How a person perceives or conceives an event would vary according to how 'she' is culturally constructed; the myriad of unpredictable ways in which such constructions may configure in the flux of her psyche and invariably upon the political repertoire of cultural discourses available to her (Brah, 1996p.ll7).

Experience assumes an essentialistic nature in becoming the collective experience. It is through the social structures that the notion of experience becomes political and collective. Individuals c^mot float free from social structures. In Malaysia, the official public and political discourse on Malaysian society is one in which each Malaysian is categorised as Malay, Chinese, Indian or Others and this official labeling determines certain rights and privileges. Yet this does not discount the diversity of experiences in being a Malay, Chinese or Indian woman/girl. Experience is a relationship between subjectivity and collective experience (Brah, 1996).

Brah's exploration of the notion of experience is useful, because it shows how experience is shaped by both collective and individual forces. Experiences that appear to be collective may be shaped by cultural and societal values and events, while experience can also be affected by subjectivity or individual agency. Daily experience is not only shaped by hegemonic discourses but also contains elements of

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resistance to such discourses (Mohanty, 1991). The articulation of collective experiences and subjective experience fits into this framework of identity and difference as both structure and agency come into play. This allows for the collective expe! .ence of being a Malaysian woman/girl yet in the same time for multiple and contradictory ways in the experiences of being Malaysian and more importantly Malay, Chinese, Indian, Others. Thus, in reflecting on myself as the Malaysian researcher and the Malaysian teenage schools girls as participants in my PhD, I have a certain sense of collective experiences with them. Having lived and immersed myself in the Malaysian society, I am not situated outside the discursive fields but located within these fields. I also acknowledge that there are a number of ethical, political and personal issues that I must consider due to the fact that I am an Indian and not a Malay, not a Chinese aiid not a teenager.

Contemporary feminists in their representation of experiences for theory and practice are expected to interrogate their positionings as feminist researcher as Rarhazanoglu and Holland (1999) argue:

> In connecting theory, experience and judgement, the knowing feminist should be accountable for the sense she makes of her own and other people's accounts and how her judgements are made (Raraazanoglu & Holland, 1999 p.386).

They further add that feminists cannot simply take account of experience as reality since we interpret them as we tell them.

1.5.2 Speaking **for** others

Contemporary feminist theorizations, including those located within postcolonial frameworks (Mohanty, 1.991; Narayan, 1997; Spivak, 1988, 1993), posit a paradigm wherein a researcher must position herself in relation to the participants with waom

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she is journeying in the research project. Spivak (1988) emphasises the importance of how one speaks and who speaks for whom in researching Third World Women. This form of positioning addresses the production of knowledge from the aspect of the gazes used in the research project as well as the representations that come out of the project. In other words, who is doing and writing the research affects the production of knowledge or the manner in which the theorisation of the research experience and findings are represented.

Contemporary feminist theorisations of difference acknowledge power relations that exist between the researcher and the participants. The relationship between the researcher and participants is and always has been a basic concern of feminist theorists because this relationship is always one of power, regardless of who is doing the researching and who is participating in the research (Alcoff, 1991; Harding, 1987; Lather, 1991).

The critical issue here is the constant need for reflexivity (Smith, 1999) as well as critical attention to social, historical and cultural specificity (Weedon, 1997). Reay (1996b) in defining reflexivity states that:

> On a fundamental level, reflexivity is about giving as full and honest an account of the research process as possible, in particular explicating the position of the researcher to the researched. I would argue it requires more; that reflexive practice should constitute a process of uncovering/recognizing the difference your differences make (Reay, 1996b p.443).

Reay further adds that reflexivity is about an honest exploration of whether any or all of thes÷ aspects of self-identity may lead to bias. Alcoff (1991) advocates that the researcher should undertake a concrete analysis of the particular power and discursive effects involved in speaking for Others. Alcoff (1991) warns of the distorted way in which this is often carried out - when speakers offer up in the spirit

of 'honesty' autobiographical information about themselves usually at the beginning of their discourse as a kind of disclaimer. She further adds that such an act does x?ot serve any purpose if it is made without critical interrogation of the bearing of such an autobiography on what is about to be said.

Spivak (1996) notes that the important issue in acknowledging one's positionalities in conducting research is,

> unlearning one's privilege as one's loss -- our privileges whatever they may be in terms of race, class, nationality, gender and the like, may have prevented us from gaining a certain kind of Other knowledge; not simply information we have not yet received but the knowledge we are not equipped to understand by reason of our social positions (Spivak, 1996 p.4).

To overcome this, Spivak (1990) further adds,

> we need to do our homework, to work hard at gaining some knowledge of the others who occupy those spaces most closed to us - and also attempt to speak to others in such a way that they might take us seriously and be able to answer back (Spivak, 1990 p.62).

She elaborates that one has to work critically through one's beliefs, prejudices and assumptions and attempt to understand how these have arisen and become naturalised. Not only does one become able to listen to that constituency but one learns to speak in a way that will permit one to be taken seriously by that other constituency. She adds that,

> then you begin to investigate what it is that silences me - rather than take this very deteministic position - since my skin colour is this, since my sex is this, I cannot speak (Spivak, 1990 p.62).

I further discuss my positionings in relation to Malaysian society and the research participants in Chapter Five on researching Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. I also address this in the concluding chapter of this thesis as I reflect on rny presentation and analysis of the ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls.

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1.5.3 Oppression and patriarchy

Another common characteristic running through the various feminisms is that feminism is political in aiming at changing the inequalities that disadvantage women in society. Feminism takes on an emancipatory struggle to bring to light the locus or loci of oppression in women's lives. Linked to the notion of oppression is the problematic concept of patriarchy. Patriarchy is seen to be a major locus of oppression in feminism. Patriarchy is a concept used in an attempt to understand the mechanisms by which men in general manage to dominate women in general (Ramazanoglu, 1989; Walby, 1989; Weedon, 1999).

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) argue that the concept of patriarchy has limited the possibility of taking account of the historical and contextual ways in which gender divisions manifest themselves. Similarly, feminists of colour (Brah, 1996; Bannerji, 1992; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1991) stress that there are different sites of oppression and struggle for different groups of women and this is dependent on the "historically specific material reality of groups of women". Loci of oppression are thus contextual and not solely centered around gender. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) state that it is important to lake into account that gender, ethnicity and class are intermeshed in each other and articulated by each other in concrete social relations when conceptualising patriarchy as the locus of oppression. Like feminists of coloir, they stress that iiOt all women are oppressed and/or subjugated in the same way or to the same extent, even within the same society at any specific moment. I draw upon this notion of oppression as conceptualised by Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992). Bannerji captures this notion of oppression under the concept of "difference" in stating:

> The particularity and immediacy of expressions of oppression by different
> groups of women have been theorised and politicized under the concept of
> "difference"(Bannerji, 1992 p.81).

Emancipatory knowledge thus results from feminist research due to its emphasis on the locus or loci of oppressions. Lather (1991) in emphasizing this states:

> Emancipatory knowledge increases awareness of the contradictions distorted
> or hidden by everyday understandings, and in doing so it directs attention to
> the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present
> configuration of social processes (Lather, 1991 p.52).

In this thesis, I aim to bring to light the tensions and contradictions in ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. What is the locus of oppression for these girls? How do these schoolgirls engage with this locus or loci of oppression through the notion of resistance?

This research is "feminist" in nature as it emphasises the notion of experience as a source of knowledge. It is "feminist" as I am reflexive of the power dynamics between myself as the Malaysian researcher, and the Malaysian schoolgirls as the research participants. I am also reflexive of my own positionings in relation to the wider Malaysian society. I also bring to light how my own values have affected the way in which I have carried out this research. This research is also "feminist" as I attempt to understand the locus of oppression for these Malaysian schoolgirls in relation to ways of being girls, schooling and the wider Malaysian societal forces, particularly the politics of ethnic identification. It is the integrating of the Malaysian experiences in the context of this research and the overarching theoretical and methodological framework of feminism of difference that makes this thesis a "Malaysian feminist" research study. The research, while emphasizing the specificity of the experiences of this group of Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls, also links

their experiences to the wider Malaysian society. Having said this, I acknowledge the multiple and shifting and de-essentialistic nature of both the terms Malaysian and "feminist".

1.6 Gender and education in Malaysia

This research focuses on one segment of contemporary Malaysian society that is Malaysian teenage schoolgirls. Based on the 2000 Population Census, about 48.9 percent or 11.4 million of the total Malaysian population are women (Malaysia, 2001). 10.9% are females in the age range of 10 to 19 years. There is a total of 2 million Malaysian secondary school students in the age range of 13 to 19 years.

Malaysia, like most other countries, adopts patriarchal ways in the social, economic and religious sectors of the society. Malaysian women still have difficulties breaking through the glass ceiling (Luke, 2001; Omar, 2000). Many of the poor in Malaysia are women. The majority of Malaysian working women are in the non-professional and non-managerial occupational categories such as production and white collar workers (Ng, 1999; Malaysia, 2001).

At the primary and secondary levels of schooling in the year 2000, the enrolment of female students was about half of the total enrolment, while at upper secondary level, female students accounted for about *66* percent of the total enrolment (Malaysia, 2001). Intake of female students into public universities expanded significantly from 50 percent in 1995 to 55 percent in 2000. With regard to preference for courses, female dominance in the Arts streams continued to be prevalent, accounting for 65 percent of total enrolment in the arts and humanities courses in 2000 (Malaysia, 2001). Female enrolment in the sciences in institutions of

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higher learning accounted for 60 percent while in the technical field it was 30 percent in 2000. In 1998, women formed 54.5% of undergraduate enrolment in public universities (Karim, 1999). In the choice of subjects, 61% were in the Arts, including professional courses such as Law, Accountancy, Economics and Management. The enrolment in Sciences is also increasing with women exceeding men in traditional Pure and Applied Sciences including Medicine and Applied Health Sciences. However, the female enrolment in technology-based subjects is still problematic; for example women form only 29% of the engineering enrolment. Within academia, the proportion of women was highest at the lecturer level (78.7%) and declined significantly at the associate professor level (17.5%) and the professor level (3.8%) (Karim, 1999). As in most of these educational statistics, the Malaysian female is described not taking into account her specific ethnic identity as either Malay, Chinese, Indian or Others. Enrolment in Malaysian universities is based on the ethnic quota system whereby 55% of the places are allocated to *Bumiputera* students (Lee, 2001). There is also the private education sector in Malaysia, where more than 90% of students enrolled in the private colleges are *non-Bumiputera* students, who cannot get into the local public universities due to this imposition of ethnic quotas (Lee, 1999). The majority of the private college students are Chinese. The question, in considering the interplay of gender and ethnicity within the Malaysian context, then arises: How do ways of being a Malay, Chinese or Indian girl determine access and success to educational and social opportunities within the Malaysian education system? Malaysian educational policies at the secondary school level are top-down leaving very little room for contestations and negotiations

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at the school level since the curriculum is defined, pedagogy supervised and examinations standardised (Wong, 2000). Wong further adds that the majority of Malaysian students are immersed in the banking and depositing pedagogy of rote-learning. What kinds of identities in relation to gender and ethnicity are constructed in the midst of these pedagogical practices within the Malaysian schooling system?

There is some research on Malaysian teenage girls but it is encompassed within research on teenagers. Most research on teenagers is located within a positivistic framework (Borhan, 1999; Ismail & Joseph, 1998; Joseph, 1997; Rahim & Pawanteh, 1999). Gender is investigated as a comparative category of males and females in relation to indices of personality and learning. Western models in ways of being and knowing within a positivistic framework are usually used as a theoretical framework to understand teenagers in Malaysia. There is a need for a framework that incorporates and values the voices of Malaysian schoolgirls and the discourses that emphasise alternative notions of meaning, power and subjectivity. Existing knowledge on ways of being and knowing in the various social institutions tend to assume western cultures to be the norm. There is a vital need to extend this work beyond Western cultures. As Mirza (1997) notes in discussing the challenges for Black British feminism, there is an urgent need to research other ways of knowing that challenge normative discourses and dominant regimes of representation of women. This is plausible only through the theorising of experiences in ways of being and knowing within non-Western societies in the global world. Bannerji (1993) states:

> This does not mean endowing each non-white woman individually with a prenatural and spontaneous insight into social reality, but rather, that the social relations which structure her locality and her experience hold clues to

the entire society's organisation, and that her experiences offer critical entry points into it (Bannerji, 1993 p.xix).

Most gender research in Malaysia is on Malaysian working women (Healey, 1993, 1999; Karim, 1992; Mohamad, 2001; Ng, 1999; Omar, 1996; Ong, 1990). Research on Malaysian-Malay women far outweighs that on women from other Malaysian ethnic groups (Healey, 1999; Karim, 1992; Mohamad, 2001; Omar, 1996; Ong, 1990). There is a small body of research on non-Malay women (Oorjitham, 1997; Ramli, 1997; Tan, 2000b). Most of this research tends to look at one particular ethnic group within a specific research site. A large number of social scientists in Malaysia (especially anthropologists and sociologists) tend to confine their research to their respective ethnic group (Syed, 2001). Syed (2001) claims:

> This has historical roots in the growth of these disciplines here, the nature of training undergone by many of them, and also the persistence of separate departments of Malay, Chinese and Indian studies. Even so, exhaustive ethnographic studies have not been done on the various ethnic groups (Syed, 2001 p. 112).

He further reiterates the necessity for integrated studies of different ethnic groups in Malaysia:

> What is more important is to have comparative and at the same time integrated studies of the different ethnic groups, in order to **fully** understand their similarities and differences; the nature, degree and rate of integration, as well as the factors which help or hinder its process. We also need to investigate the impact of the great Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian civilizations on our identity (Syed, 2001 p.112).

My research addresses areas presently neglected. Firstly it provides, feminist theorising on schoolgirls in a non-Western context. The research focuses on Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. The research also focuses on schooling and its role in identity formation. It examines the interethnic and intra-ethnic dimensions in ways of being a Malay, Chinese and Indian girl within the schooling site. This research

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will provide valuable insights into the contestations and negotiations young Malaysian schoolgirls undertake in constructing their identity in the midst of the politics of ethnic identification in Malaysia.

Contemporary research on schooling and girls (Haw, 1998; Matthews, 1996, 2002; Proweller, 1998; Shain, 2000; Tsolidis, 1996, 2001) is often located within mainstream contexts where the dominant culture is Western. Within such research, attention is given to girls from marginal locations in relation to the mainstream; for example Haw (1998) looked at Muslim girls in England where the dominant culture is Western and Muslims are one of the minority groups. There is a need for research on girls and schooling in which the center and margins are examined in contexts unlike this. Such research will continue and extend important work that theorises identity and difference specifically in relation to gender and schooling. In the case of this study, it will answer questions such as: How are the center and margins constituted within Malaysian discourses of the politics of ethnic identification? How are these constituted in the schooling context in Malaysia and do they shift? Insights into these matters are important for an understanding of how Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls see themselves as girls and students.

1.7 Outline of the thesis

In this chapter I have provided the personal, social and theoretical backdrop against which this thesis is crafted. The Malaysian context in terms of the politics of ethnic identification was briefly described. The research questions were contextualised in relation to my experiences as a student and educator within the Malaysian education system as well as the larger societal ethnic dynamics. I also discussed briefly the

significant theoretical concepts located within the overarching feminist framework of difference that I use in examining the research questions. I argued for the notion of experience as a source of knowledge in my thesis. I discussed the dynamics in the relationship between the researcher and the research participants, which I will further address in Chapter Five. This is linked to the notion of oppression and emancipation. I also discussed my research in relation to the field of gender and education in Malaysia in particular and in general to gender and schooling.

Chapter Two examines significant social and political events that have led to the politics of ethnic identification in contemporary postcolonial Malaysia. The social and economic characteristics of the ethnic groups of the Malays, Chinese and Indians are discussed. Being Malay, Chinese and Indian within a framework of sameness and differences is conceptualised with an emphasis on the notion of ethnicity. I proceed to discuss one of the social institutions in Malaysia, schooling. I also link the Malaysian schooling and education system to the politics of ethnic identification.

The theoretical framework for this thesis is discussed in Chapter Three. Contemporary theorizations of gender and ethnicity ars discussed. I explore the manner is which female identity is understood within feminist scholarship with a focus on feminism of difference. The interplay of agency and structure is examined. A discussion of schooling as a significant institutional practice is next provided in this chapter. I draw on critical feminist educationists and critical education theorists to link gender, ethnicity and schooling. I also conceptualise the notion of resistance as a way of understanding the production of identities within the schooling institution.

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In Chapter Four, I discuss the methods of research I used with this group of Malaysian schoolgirls. I present what I did in the field and why I did it. I also further discuss my positionings as the Malaysian researcher vis-à-vis Malaysian society and the research participants, the 16 year-old schoolgirls.

Chapter Five describes in detail the research site, Parkview Girls' Secondary School and the schoolgirls. I also use the girls' voices as well as my own observations to provide a profile of the classes these girls are from. The girls' voices are also used to describe the school ethos of Parkview Girls' Secondary School.

Chapters Six, Seven and Eight deal with the empirical work in examining ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. I explore the themes that emerged from these girls' essays on being a girl and their experiences of schooling as well as the individual and group interviews. I group each of the ethnic groups of girls into academically successful and academically unsuccessful girls based on their academic rankings. Within each of these two groups, I cluster the girls according to the different patternings in ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian girls. In doing so, I provide the differences and similarities in the patternings between ways of being girls and educational outcomes. I also link this patterning to conforming and rebellious behaviour in school.

In Chapter Nine, I use the notion of resistance to make sense of the patterning between the notion of the 'Western' / 'traditional' girl, academic success/failure and conforming/rebellious behaviour in school. In this chapter, I also address the notion of locus of oppression in relation to the girls' experiences within the schooling system. I attempt to reconcile the politics of ethnic identification, schooling and

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patriarchy within notions of oppression in ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian girls. I discuss the similarities and differences in the notion of resistance in relation to gender, ethnicity and schooling of these ethnic groups of girls.

Chapter Ten revisits the research questions and relates these to the main findings of the thesis. I also reflect on my role as the researcher in looking at why I did the research in this particular way. I explore what the analysis has told me about my own positionings. Finally, the implications of the research findings and experiences for current theoretical debates and future research are discussed.

Chapter Two

Contemporary Malaysia

2.1 Introduction

> These major ethnic religious differentiations do not exhaust the cultural complexity and diversity of Malaysian society. They do, however, crudely reflect the reality of Malaysia's plural society, a characterization of Malaysian society that has been compelling for many observers because Malaysian social and political life appears to be overwhelmingly organised around this plural society and its trends of fluctuating, interethnic competition, compromise and conflict (Jomo, Khoo & Chang 1996, as cited in Saravanamuttu, 2001 p.99).

In this quotation, Malaysian academics depict the character of Malaysia's plural society and ethnoscape. This quotation clearly illustrates the importance of ethnicity within contemporary Malaysia. Saravanamuttu (1994) further captures the complexity in terms of the ethnic and cultural configaration of Malaysian society when stating that,

> The range of cultural *difference* one faces in approaching the Malaysian problem in more daunting than in most situations as one would have to deconstruct not only the three major ethnic components on the Peninsula - Malay, Chinese, Indian (and even these categories are only generic) — but one has to further deal with the range of cultural differences in the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, each with its own composition of indigenous and immigrant communities (Savaranamuttu, 1994 p. 218-219).

The interplay of gender, ethnicity and schooling is examined in this thesis. As stated in Chapter One, ethnicity is a very significant aspect in theorising identity within multiethnic Malaysia (Lee, 2000, Mariappan, 1996; Saravanamuttu, 2001; Wong, 2001b).

As clarified in Chapter One, I use the term "politics of ethnic identification" - to refer to the multiple and shifting power dynamics related to the social, economic and educational privileges and positionings associated with the official ethnic

labeling of a Malaysian as a Malay, Chinese, Indian or Others. This ethnic categorisation appears in all official documents and records from the day of birth of a Malaysian. I also use this term to denote the uneven distribution of economic, political and social power amongst the different ethnic groups in Malaysia that is a result of the official political ethnic labelling. This politics of ethnic identification is inextricably intertwined with the politics of difference. Feminists of difference (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1986, 1990; Mohanty, 1994; Yeatman, 3993, 1994) refer to differences in ways of being that are located within the intertwining of dimensions including gender, ethnicity and class within specific contexts. Mohanty captures this notion of difference that is linked to power and hierarchy in stating,

> The central issue, then is not one of merely acknowledging difference; rather, the more difficult question concerns the kind of difference that is acknowledged ?ind engaged. Difference seen as benign variation (diversity), for instance, rather than as conflict, struggle, or the threat of disruption, bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious, empty pluralism (Mohanty, 1994 p. 146).

The notion of power is crucial to the politics of ethnic identification. Power according to Foucault, is a relation and inheres in difference (Weedon, 1997). Power is a dynamic of control, compliance and lack of control between discourses and the subjects constituted by discourses, who are their agents (Weedon, 1997). In Foucault's work, discourses produce subjects within relations of power that potentially or actually involve resistance. Thus, processes of self-identification are located within discourses that are themselves embedded within relations of power. The link between discourse, power and resistance will be addressed in depth in the next chapter on the theoretical framings of this thesis.

I discuss below the dominant discourses that, operate within Malaysian society, and which contribute to the processes of identification of a Malaysian, but first *I* provide some key facts about Malaysia as an introduction to the social and political milieu of postcolonial Malaysia.

2.2. Key facts about Malaysia

This section gives an overview of Malaysia in terms of ethnic, social and economic demography. Geographically, the Federation of Malaysia comprises Peninsular Malaysia or West Malaysia (the southern-most peninsula of mainland Southeast Asia) and East Malaysia (northern third of the island of Borneo). Modern Peninsula Malaysia (known as Malaya until 1963) consists of 11 states, nine of which are ruled by hereditary Malay rulers (known as *Sultans* in Malay). These states are Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor and Terengganu. The other two states are Penang and Malacca, each with a Governor as *&•?.* head of state. Sabah and Sarawak are two states that are on the north-eastern part of the island of Borneo, which is known as East Malaysia. Each of these states differs in terms of ethnic demography and levels of urbanisation. For example, the states of Kelantan and Terengganu that are ruled by an Islamic opposition party have 95% of its state population as Malay-Muslims (Malaysia, 2002). These states also have a low percentage of urbanised population. States like Penang and the Federal Territory with a high percentage of urbanised population have almost an equal percentage of Malays and Chinese. In this thesis, I have chosen to work in Penang. While the demography of the state of Penang differs from that of the national demography, all states in

Malaysia come under the same centralised economic, educational and social policies. I will provide further details about the state of Penang in Chapter Five on the research site and research participants.

Malaysia came into being in 1957 after gaining independence from Britain. Prior to western colonisation, the region had existed as part of the "Malay Archipelago". The "Malay Archipelago" refers to a much v/ider geographical area where the population is believed to belong to the Malay "stock", more or less sharing the same cultural and historical background, and this area has been under the influence of the same traditional political powers (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Syed, 1981).

Malaysia has a federal system of government with a democratically elected parliament and a constitutional monarch. The government is headed by the Prime Minister and the King (or Yang di Pertuan Agong). The King plays mainly a ceremonial role as head of state. There is some ambivalence within academia as to the present mode of governance in Malaysia being democratic. Two Malaysian social scientists, Mohamad and Wong (2001) state that by the 1990s, the Malaysian state had become increasingly authoritarian in response to a heightened fragmentation of the cultural and political situation. However, it is not the purpose of this thesis to interrogate the current political context of Malaysia. I will provide a brief description on this in the section on contemporary Malaysia as some political events do impinge on the identity of a Malaysian.

Although Malaysia is not an Islamic state, Islam is Malaysia's official religion, professed by almost 60.4 percent of its population. Most Muslims are

Malays and all Malays are by definition Muslims. There is a clear separation between state and religion. The Constitution guarantees freedom of worship for all other religions namely Buddhists (mainly Chinese), Hindus (mainly Indians) and Christians (Chinese, Indians and other indigenes) (Saravanamuttu, 2001). The distribution of religious beliefs according the 2000 Malaysian Census indicates that 60.4% profess Islam, 19.2% Buddhism, 9.1% Christianity, 6.3% Hinduism and 2.6% Confiicianism/Taoism/other traditional Chinese religions. There are also over 1 million non-citizens, mostly migrant workers (from Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines) in Malaysia today. While the *Bumiputeras* comprise 66.1% of the Malaysian population, the *non-Bwniputeras* are a significant minority forming 33.9% of the Malaysian population. Appendix A provides recent statistical information on the population size, employment by occupation and ethnic group and ownership of share capital in Malaysia.

Malaysians have also over the past decade become more urbanised. However, as stated earlier, different states in Malaysia have different percentages of urbanised population. The proportion of the population living in urban areas continued to increase from 55.1 percent in 1995 to 61.8 percent in 2000, growing at an average annual rate of 4.8 percent.

Malaysia is seen globally as a developing multiethnic and multicultural Southeast Asian nation. Malaysia is also seen as one of the modern Islamic nations that draws upon discourses of modernity such as capitalism and consumerism as well as Islamic and Asian principles in the management and government of the various state machineries.

2.3 Postcolonial Malaysia (after 1957)

Independence in 1957 brought with it nationalistic feelings and intense identifications (Santhiram, 1999). The majority/minority dichotomy took on an indigenous/non-indigenous grouping as well. The Malays and the other native groups came under a common generic term of *Bumiputera* - literally meaning "sons of soil"; and the non-Malay, immigrant groups of Chinese and Indians became known as the *non-Bumiputeras,* This indigenous/non-indigenous division in the Malaysian context also reflected the majority/minority grouping in terms of sheer numbers.

The racial riots on May 13th 1969 are a significant event in the ethnic politics of Malaysia. It is now accepted that this incident was a watershed and an antecedent to Malaysia's present-day political and cultural manifestations (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Mohamad & Wong, 2001; Muzaffar, 1993). The riots were due to the outcome of the 1969 Federal elections, wherein the party in Government, the Alliance party failed to capture the 2/3 majority which had previously enabled it to obtain constitutional amendments with ease (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). The riots were also due to dissatisfaction and frustration between the Malays and non-Malays. The Malays in spite of their special rights had not really achieved any significant progress in the economy even after 10 years of independence (Mariappan, 1996). From the mid 1950s to the late 1960s under the Alliance coalition government's laissez-faire regime, the Malay-Chinese income disparity increased (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Heng, 1996). Free market and open competition in the economic spheres of Malaysia, without interference from the government allowed for the expansion and diversification of Chinese economic activities (Heng, 1996). For the non-Malays, the

institutionalisation of the Malays' special rights in the Malaysian constitution in 1957 was a political blow (Mariappan, 1996). The ethnic disturbances of May 1969 forced the Government to reassess the entire question of economic growth in relation to the now vocal Malay demand for a greater share in the country's wealth (Andaya & Andaya, 2001).

The New Economic Policy, NEP (1970-1990) following the 1969 racial riots was implemented to eliminate poverty and the identification of economic function with particular ethnic groups (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Loo, 2000; Mandal, 2000). In particular, ownership of equity capital by *Bumiputeras, non-Bumiputeras* and foreigners would conform to a ratio of 30:40:30. Malays were given particular attention, for they were largely relegated to the rural economy and relatively poor as a whole. During the British colonial period, the Malays were mainly involved in the low-income subsistence agricultural sector (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). The NEP, a state affirmative action is an overall policy of socio-economy and politics. Its implementation has resulted in greater state intervention in exercising a favourable increase in the intake, or quotas, for Malays in governmental employment, in educational training programmes and in the private sectors of the economy (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Jasbir & Mukerjhee, 1993; Lee, 1997; Loo, 2000; Mariappan, 1996). Many critics of this policy, rightly or wrongly, see it as correcting the imbalance between the Malays and other ethnic groups rather than uplifting all indigenous groups (Wong, 2001b).

The state also launched the National Culture Policy in 1971 and the constitution of a national culture was proposed in which the Malay language and

traditions would form the core around which, the languages and traditions of other ethnic groups would be incorporated (Mandal, 2000).

The NEP as the embodiment of Malay economic nationalism touched virtually all aspects of Malaysian life (Heng, 1996). Ethnic politics in Malaysia was further heightened with the NEP. Mohamad and Wong (2001) state,

> As soon as the New Economic Policy (NEP) was enacted identity politics readily took its course acting as boundary closure to mark off the *Bumiputera* (indigenous) from the *non-Bumiputera* or largely the Malay from the non-Malay, as the new, *Islamized* Malay became more assertive, forceful and found strength in a global movement (Mohamad & Wong, 2001 p.29-30).

There were also constitutional amendments in 1971, which limited the parameters of political debates (Heng, 1996). Articles of legislation were used to curb civil liberties: the Internal Security Act (ISA), Official Secrets Act (OSA), Printing and Presses Act (PPA) and the Sedition Act (SA). An important tool in implementing Malay economic and cultural policies is the Sedition Act. This Act prohibits public or even parliamentary questioning on constitutional matters that are regarded as "sensitive issues". These issues include the sovereignty of the Malay rulers as they symbolically represent the Malays' exclusive historical link with the country. Others are the Malays' special privilege, status of Malay as the official and national language, the status of Islam as the official religion and the citizenship rights of non-Malays. The government may also prohibit any other controversial issue if it is perceived to directly or indirectly challenge political stability.

Many of the NEP's achievements can be attributed to education (Daud, 1999). Thousands of Malays received scholarships to study overseas, while at home 64% of the slots in public universities were reserved for Malays (Sity, 1999). The affirmative action scheme in education hastened the process of increasing the number of Malay

doctors, lawyers and engineers and gradually wiped out stereotypes about Malays being mainly farmers and civil servants. During the NEP period, all ethnic groups experienced an overall rise in income which resulted in Malaysia's growing middle class. The period of the NEP-NDP has improved the lot of many Malays as well as many lower- and middle-class Chinese and Indians (Andaya & Andaya, 2001)

Despite this affirmative action, the aim of a 30% share of the corporate sector for the *Bumiputeras* by 1990 was far from achieved. Toward the close of NEP, Malay equity ownership had risen from 1.7% in 1969 to 20.3% in 1990 (Sity, 1999). In 1999 it was 19.1% while Chinese equity ownership rose from 22.7% in 1970 to 37.9% in 1999 (Malaysia, 2001). That of the Indians remains at 1.5 percent. The Government decided to launch the National Development Policy (NDP) in 1991 which allowed for a limited liberalization of the economy. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was enacted in 1970, the New Development Policy (NDP) in 1990 and the New Vision Policy (NVP) in 2001. These are policy plans to frame priorities for the country. While they may vary in macroeconomic and fiscal emphases, they have departed only superficially from ensuring that affirmative action policies for the *Bumiputera* remain untouched (Mohamad & Wong, 2001).

Mohamad and Wong (2001) emphasise the effects of these policies on the ethnic politics in Malaysia,

> Malaysia's long-standing political culture of fear, has, as its henchmen, the ISA, OSA, PPA and the SA. It also has a persistent cultural politics of racial-based patronage, aided by its other henchmen - the NEP, NDP, NVP and the BN. Between the two sets of abbreviations the country, it seems, may be doomed to a state of unchanging paralysis; or is it? (Mohamad & Wong, 2001 p.39).

The above events have helped shape contemporary postcolonial Malaysia where the politics of ethnic identification is evident and features prominently in everyday social interactions. There is an institutionalization of Malay political dominance through the implementation of ethnic preferential cultural, language, educational and economic policies in favour of the Malays. However, the non-Malays or *non-Bumiputera* category constitutes a significant minority in being 34% of the Malaysian population. Thus political decisions and public policies are made on the basis of power relations between Malays and non-Malays (Mariappan, 1996).

2.4 Contemporary Malaysia - politics of ethnic identification

Modern ethnic relations in Malaysii are a by-product of British coionialism (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Daud, 1999; Maheswari & Sar.thiram, 2000; Mariappan, 1996). The colonial situation led on to the economic, social and educational imbalance amongst the ethnic groups in Malaysia. This will be discussed in detail in subsequent sections in this chapter. In postcolonial Malaysia, the distribution of economic and political power continues to run along ethnic lines (Lee, 1997). The indigenous Malay community holds the political power while the Chinese and foreign communities hold the economic power. Saravanamuttu (2001), in commenting on the ethnic and class divisions within postcolonial Malaysia, states

> While the plural society remains the most important leitmotif of social and political life; one should not forget that Malaysia's immediate postcolonial society exhibited class divisions, which by and large coincided with ethnic divisions (Saravanamuttu 2001, p.99-100).

The independence struggle and the 1969 Riots led to the various governmental policies (like the NEP) that favour the ethnic majority as a way of correcting this

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imbalance. These events have brought about the politics of ethnic identification in contemporary Malaysia. These ethnic politics are further complicated by the recent events of the 1990s; the economic crisis of 1997; the Anwar Ibrahim arrest in September 1998; the Internal Security Act detention of the various opposition leaders, the crisis within the ruling component parties as well as the opposition parties. Mohamad and Wong (2001) assert that,

> In Malaysia it is being invoked in the 21st century to clamp down on dissension, difference, disagreement and diversity, values the new millenium should supposedly celebrate (Mohamad & Wong, 2001 p.38).

The various ethnic groups in Malaysia work, study and socialise together within the various facets of Malaysian life. However, there is a constant subtle tension as Malaysians grapple with the politics of ethnic identification when public discourses on being Malaysian intertwine with the daily experiences of being Malaysian.

The Malays, the dominant ethnic group, politically, form the main labour force in government administration, the armed forces and at the ministerial levels. The Chinese, a significant minority, monopolise the private or corporate sector having had the historical experience of capital accumulation. The Indians are basically lagging behind economically, educationally and socially in comparison to the Malays and Chinese. There is the public or governmental space for the *Mal&ys/Bumiputeras* and there is the corporate/private sector for the largest group of non-Malays, namely the Chinese. Through the politics of ethnic identification in Malaysia, a symbiotic relationship exists between these two major ethnic groups.

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In this next section, I briefly outline each of the major ethnic groups, namely Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others before conceptualising the notion of Malaysian within a framework of identity and difference.

2.4.1 A note on the Malays in Malaysia

The first formal colonial definition of a Malay was made in the Malay Reservations Act of 1913, classifying as a Malay "any person belonging to the Malayan race" who habitually spoke Malay or "any other Malayan language: and who professed Islam" (Andaya & Andaya, 2001 p. 183). Malay ethnicity and the Malays' entitlement to special rights as *Bumiputeras* are constitutionally defined in Malaysia. The importance attached to the "special rights" of the Malays is such that the term Malay is a clearly defined constitutional term. According to Article 160 (2) of the Federal constitution (Loo, 2000; Mutalib, 1990; Syed, 1981), a Malay

> means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and -
> (a) was before Merdeka born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore, or
>
> (b) is the issue of such a person.

The Malaysian Federal constitution states that if either parent is Malay, then the child is classified as Malay and, thus a *Bumiputera* which ensures certain educational, economic and political privileges.. The constitution has as one of the main criteria in the definition of Malay that he or she must be Muslim. In Malaysia, a non-Malay has to convert to Islam when he/she marries a Malay. The term *Bumiputera* or "sons of the soil" was created during the inter-ethnic bargaining at the time of independence. When the British granted independence to West Malaysia (then called the Federation of Malaysia) in 1957, "special rights" were given to native Malays to benefit from

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preferential economic and educational policies (Daud, 1999; Lee, 1997; Loo, 2000; Syed, 1981). When the states of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo joined Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia, the East Malaysian natives were also given "special rights. The inclusion of large numbers of indigenous groups from the East Malaysia states of Sabah and Sarawak resulted in the revision of the old ethnic categories.

The Bornean peoples had been classified with the Malays of the Peninsula for political purposes. This group remained an anomaly since most were clearly not Malay in language, religion or culture. To overcome this difficulty, the term *Bumiputem,* was created to refer to the Peninsular Orang Asli, the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak, and Malays. Certain non-natives who inhabited Malaysia before the British colonial period for example the Thais and Portugese were also granted *Bumipuiera* status. In practical administrative calculations regarding employment, education and economic quotas, the *Bumiputera* category virtually replaced that of Malay. Yet distinctions within the *Bumiputera* category persist. In Peninsula, Malay *Bumiputera* are clearly favoured over Orang Asli *Bumiputera* (Andaya & Andaya, 2001).

This very political definition of Malays, their language and religion in the Constitution has further reinforced the importance of the cultural-religious definition of ethnicity used to differentiate between Malays and non-Malays (Mariappan, 1996). Since the Malays are constitutionally defined, the Chinese and Indians have automatically formed the other political category as "non-Malays". The division which is again synonymous with *Bumiputeralnon-Bumiputera* division, runs parallel to Muslim/non-Muslim divisions. For the Malays and non-Malays, all these

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overlapping identities are politically important in their relations and demands in competition with each other (Mariappan, 1996).

> Means (1991) states that
>
> For Malays...the categories Malay, *Bumiputera,* and Muslim are not quite contiguous but do overlap to a very large extent...which of these three categories is stressed for political mobilization is a matter of shifting strategies and alliances...each category is energised by a different set of emotive symbols of identity as well as by different issues of public policy that highlight and make salient that constituency.. .thus there is a continuous interplay between the themes of ethnicity and culture and indigenousness, and of religion in the discourse of politics (Means, 1991 p. 123).

This is also carried into every facet of daily living in Malaysia - from politics to economics to education.

Islam is very influential in the Malay way of life, but *adat* has a parallel influence (Omar, 1996). *Adat* existed in Malay society long before Islam was embraced by the Malays and is crucial to Malay identity. *Adat* in its commonly understood usage means custom, tradition and the accepted ways of doing things by the Malays. It is the basis for appropriate behaviour that all Malays should follow. The Malay identity is thus an intersection between the state's dominant discourse invoking the *Bumiputera/non-Bumiputera* political and ethnic dichotomy, discourses on Islam and Malay *adat* and discourses of modernity (capitalism and consumer culture).

2.4.2 A note on the Chinese in Malaysia

Immigrants from China during the colonial period were mainly from peasant and coolie backgrounds (Heng, 1996). They had a cultural identity inherited from a 3,000 year old civilization underpinned by Confucian values and precepts (Heng, 1996). From the early days of mass immigration in the middle of the 19th century until World

War II, Chinese in Malaya were given considerable independence by the British in running their internal affairs (Heng, 1996). They developed strong habits of autonomous political, economic and cultural behaviour. Chinese social organisations in Malaysia were based on those in China. The three principal institutions that were transplanted to Malaya from China were the lineage group (clan) association, the voluntary association based on affiliations of common locality, common dialect and/or common craft and the secret society (Heng, 1996).

During the colonial period, Chinese business activities were centered around mainly the production of tin, rubber, in haulage and transportation, light manufacturing, rice milling and food processing, and in the distributive and services trades (Heng, 1996). During the colonial period, the Chinese economic role was much bigger than that of Malays who were mainly subsistence rice farmers and rubber smallholders, and Indians who were mainly rubber plantation workers (Heng, 1996).

In contemporary Malaysia, the Chinese have maintained a significant economic role and power. Phang (2000) states,

> The economic role of the Chinese in Malaysia has been a substantial one. Although Chinese form only 1/3 of the total population of Malaysia, they have contributed beyond that proportion, both in employment and investment. The Chinese in Malaysia have been at the forefront of the country's economic frontiers moving with the times to exploit opportunities for moving into more profitable lines of business (Phang, 2000 p. 120).

The Chinese in Malaysia are internally differentiated along lines of dialect groups, educational backgrounds (Chinese, English or Malay educated), acculturations and religion (Tan, 2000). There is really no one Chinese culture. Unlike the Malays who are all Muslims, Chinese are socio-culturally more heterogeneous. Tan (2000) states

that while Chinese culture in Malaysia has different models due to socio-cultural adaptation, yet Malaysian Chinese, due to cultural continuity share a common cultural past in China and are united by a set of common Chinese traditions. He adds that from the perspectives of ethnic identity and national identity Malaysian Chinese are both Chinese and Malaysians. Being Chinese cannot be objectively defined merely in terms of certain static cultural features. Heng (1996) states there are four dimensions that characterise Chinese identity in contemporary Malaysia. These are Confucian values and other elements of the Chinese cultural heritage, language, diet and adaptation to Malay dominancy. This adaptation is political and strategic to Malay dominancy in the government and political spheres. He gives some examples of the Confucian values such as filial piety, ancestor worship, self-cultivation based on education and ethnic conduct.

Thus, the Malaysian-Chinese identity is one that intersects with Confucian values, Chinese traditions and culture and the Malay governmental and political dominancy in Malaysia as well as with modernity.

2.4.3 A note on the Indians in Malaysia

The Indians in Malaysia who constitute 7.4 percent of the Malaysian population form the third largest ethnic group in the country (Malaysia, 2001). The term Indian whilst denoting ancestry from the Indian subcontinent does not imply any homogeneity of ethnicity (Santhiram, 1999). The Indian community in Malaysia is, by and large, a potpourri of linguistic sub-groups. For various reasons, principally the colonial labour policy, the South Indian Tamils constitute about 85 percent of the total Indian population in Malaysia. The Malayalees and the Telugus form the next

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largest groups while the remainder of the Indian community is accounted for by the

Punjabis, Bengalis, Gujuratis and the Sindhis.

Muzaffar (1993) attributes the current political and economic status of Indians

in Malaysia to the effects of British colonialism in stating that,

> Right from the outset, with the method of recruiting labour from South India
> for British sugar and coffee and later rubber plantations, the Indian was
> destined to remain poor and exploited. • .under the indenture system of labour
> recruitment, not only were wages miserably low and working conditions
> harsh and brutal, the plantation labourer also remained chained to his place of
> work through an intricate network of financial relationships (Muzaffar, 1993
> p.212).

Due to the conditions in the plantations during the colonial times, it was difficult for

the larger segment of the Indian community to move into the middle class. Muzaffar

(1993) also contrasts the Chinese community to the Indians during the colonial times

in terms of economic and political power in stating,

> Also immigrant, the Chinese were, however, mainly free labourers. Though
> they too experienced a great deal of poverty and suffering, they moved in and
> out of various sectors of the economy. This gave them a great amount of
> mobility between the different sectors of the economy. As a result they could
> take advantage of the vacuum that existed in the retail and to some extent the
> wholesale trade. After a generation or two, some of them were well
> entrenched in the middle and upper strata of colonial society (Muzaffar, 1993
> p.213).

The Indians like the Chinese in present day Malaysia are also differentiated

along lines of dialect groups, educational backgrounds and religion. However, the

majority of the Indians in Malaysia are Tamils and most of the Tamils are Hindus.

Within the Indian collective in Malaysia, there exists a dominant cultural and

religious discourse of Tamilness and Hinduism.   In a 2000 report by the Social

Strategic Foundation in Malaysia on the social status of the Indian community in

Malaysia, it is stated the academic achievement of Indian students in the schools and

universities is not satisfactory.   The intake of Indian students into professional

courses in the public universities is very low. The failure rates among Indian school students are high and Indians currently comprise only about 4% of university students. During my lectureship at the Science University of Malaysia, I recall comments by Indian academics that the Indian quota in public Malaysian universities is never filled, as there is a lack of suitably qualified Indian students.

The picture that emerges from the minimal literature on Malaysian Indians (Oorjitham, 1997; Santhiram, 1999, Sandhu & Mani, 1993) and my own lived experiences as a Malaysian-Indian~Tamil is one of a community that is lagging behind economically, socially and educationally in comparison to the Malays and Chinese.

2.4.4 A note on Others in Malaysia

There has not been much conceptualization of the category of Malaysians called "Others", which forms 1.2% of the Maiaysian population. Those who are not classified as *Bumiputera,* Chinese or Indians fall into this category. They include Eurasians who are descendents from Dutch, British or German parentage. Andaya and Andaya (2001) state that no real thought was given to the group the British defined as the "Others". They write:

> No real thought was given to the marginalised category of "Others", which included groups like the *anak awak* of Penang, the children of Siamese or Burmese fathers and Chinese or Baba mothers. British suspicion of the "half-breed" was evident in their attitude to the Eurasians. Usually of mixed Portugese or Dutch descent, they were relegated to secondary positions...another group which did not fit easily into British categories were the Jawi-Peranakan, individuals of Malay-Indian or Malay-Arab descent (Andaya & Andaya, 2001 p. 183).

2.5 The politics of difference in Malaysia

There is a strong sense of ethnic collectivity in Malaysia. This is manifested in the ethnic categorisations of Malaysian in all official political, social and educational documents and policies. There is an official and political discourse on the identity of a Malaysian which runs along lines of ethnicity and religion. One's role as a Malay, Chinese, Indian or Others often takes precedence over common (Malaysian) citizenship (Nagata & Salaff, 1996). Ethnic labeling also determines many social and political rights, from access to certain educational and occupational opportunities to more diffuse cultural and religious privileges (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Nagata & Salaff, 1996; Wong, 2001).

Since the Malays are constitutionally defined and there is no political definition for the other ethnic categories, the Chinese, Indians and Others are represented in relation to the Malays as the other political category of non-Malays. This dichotomy of Malay/non-Malays is synonymous with the *Bumiputera/non-Bumiputera* division as 80% of the *Bumiputera* category are Malays. These divisions also run parallel with the Muslim/non-Muslims dichotomy as most of the *Bumiputeras* are Muslims and all Malays are Muslims. As Mariappan (1996) states,

> For the Malays and non-Malays, all these overlapping identities are politically important in their relations and demands against each other (Mariappan, 1996 p.24).

The categories Malay, Muslims *and Bumiputera* are inextricably intertwined. Yuval-Davis (1994, 1997) states that,

> Ethnicity relates to the politics of the collectivity boundaries, dividing the world into "us" and "them" around, usually myths of common origins and/or destiny and engaging in constant processes of struggle and negotiations. These are aimed, from specific positionings within the

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collectivities, at promoting the collectivity or perpetuating its advantages
via access to state and civil society powers (Yuval-Davis, 1994 p. 182).

Collective here refers to a group where there are ct jnonalities of experience around

a specific axis of differentiation - say class, ethnicity, caste or religion - and these

commonalities are invested with particular meaning (Brah, 1996). Collectivities are

social constructs whose boundaries, structures and norms are the result of constant

processes of struggles and negotiations or more general social development (Yuval-

Davis, 1994).

In the Malaysian context, the "us" and "them" divide runs along the ethnic

divide of *Bumiputeras/non-Bumiputeras* which is synonymous with Malays/non-

Malays and Muslims/non-Muslims. The constitutionally provided and indigenous

status of *Bumiputera,* which is in part the result of the unequal social and economic

powers between the ethnic groups during the British colonisation, is used as one of

the major political tools to ensure the ethnic group of Malays remains the dominant

political and ethnic group in Malaysia. Islam is also used as a mechanism to ensure

the dominancy of the Malay in the official social spheres. The Malay language is the

national language. Yuval-Davis (1997) states that ethnic projects mobilise all

available relevant resources for their promotion. She further adds that some of these

resources are political, some are economic and some are related to customs, language,

religion and other cultural artifacts and memories. This is also seen through the

various state policies as described earlier on in this chapter such as the New Vision

Policy (which is an extension of the New Economic Policy). The Malay ethnic

collective has numerical and political strength in addition to the special privileges

within the economic and educational spheres in Malaysia. Malay and Muslim

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discourses in ways of being, doing and knowing are thus evident in the economic, social and educational contexts within the Governmental realm.

However, the political category of *non-Bumiputera/non-Mal&ys/nov* Muslims should not be discounted. These collectivities do not exist in isolation. There are constant processes of political negotiations and contestations between and within these political categories of *Bumiputera* and *non-Bumiputera.* As Yeatman (1993) states,

> Politics is a contestatory relationship between those who name themselves as excluded by established policy and those who are positioned as the guardians of established policy. The identity of the former does not precede politics but is interpellated within the space of this contestation (Yeatman, 1993 p.xxiii).

Yuval-Davis (1994, 1997) adds that ethnicity is primarily a political process which constructs the collectivity and 'its interest' not only as a result of the general positioning of the collectivity in relation to others in the society but also as a result of the specific relationships of those engaged in 'ethnic politics' with others within that collectivity. Both the *Bumiputeras* and the *non-Bumiputeras* are constantly negotiating with these political labels especially when it comes to educational, economic and social spheres as these are the political resources used to ensure the dominancy of the ethnic majority, the Malays. I argue that while political negotiations are constantly underway between the *Bumiputeras* and the non-*Bumiputeras,* they are more specifically between the Malays and Chinese. The Chinese who hold a significant portion of the 'economic pie' are seen as a greater threat to the Malay dominancy than the Indian and Others ethnic collectives who do not hold much economic or political power. As stated earlier, there is a symbiotic

relationship between the Malays and Chinese so as to ensure that each group maintains its own kind of dominancy.

The identity of a Malaysian or more appropriately Malay, Chinese, Indian and Others is linked to these official dichotomisations and categories, daily living, as well as present and historical social and political events. How then does one conceptualise the identity of a Malaysian in the midst of these intraethnic and interethnic dynamics within the ethnic politics in contemporary Malaysia?

Yuval-Davies (1997) argues that cultural models are the ways in which individuals experience themselves, their collectivities and the world. At any given time, a collectivity would have specific dominant processes of social interaction, institutions and traditions. An individual having lived and immersed oneself within a particular collectivity would have assumed some of the signifying practices, and this would result in a certain degree of sameness among members of that collectivity. In other words, commonalities of experience (Brah, 1996) within the ethnic collectivities would result in some form of homogeneity in the self-identifications of members of an ethnic group. As such there are the collective identities of Malayness, Chineseness and Indianess. There is also the political labeling of *Bumiputeras* and the non-*Bumiputeras* that is activated and mobilised in official social, educational and economic contexts as a means of achieving political objectives. Ways of being and knowing in contemporary Malaysia are political and strategic. There are constant negotiations and contestations between these various categories, the political categories of *Bumiputeras/ncm-Bumiputeras* and the ethnic collectivites of Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others. And religion is also a very important facet of this

contestation. The daily living experiences of the individual are also an important facet of these contestations and negotiations. These ethnic and political labellings and daily living experiences are intermeshed with each other. The articulation of these collective experiences and personal experiences results in multiple, shifting and contradictory ways of being Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others in contemporary Malaysia.

Past and present political events and interactions with the various social institutions also contribute to heterogeneity between and within the ethnic groups. Wong (2001b) captures this in her statement that:

> Besides inter-ethnic, inter-class, inter-gender and inter-religious dynamics which interrogate a unitary nation, intra-ethnic differences complicate further Malaysian political and civil society in the decades after 1969 and the implementation of the New Economic Policy (Wong, 2001b p. 76).

Degrees of motivation and desire in the context of ethnic politics come into play resulting in the uniqueness of the selfhood of members within each Malaysian ethnic collectivity. In the Malaysian context, the development and practice of new discourses on identity involves grappling with both subjective and social/structural constraints and possibilities.

The politics of ethnic identification in Malaysia is entwined with the politics of difference. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, difference here is not just attributed to diversity but to differences that are embedded within webs of power as argued by Mohanty (1994). The state-imposed ethnic labeling of Malay, Chinese, Indian, Others and the political categories of Bumiputera/non-Bumiputera are the official discourses of ethnicity in Malaysia. As argued in this chapter, this state and political labeling carries with it different forms of political, economic, social and

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educational power. There are special privileges through the affirmative action policy for the Bumiputera and Malay collectivities. There is the symbiotic relationship between the ethnic collective of Malays and Chinese within the economic and political spheres. Thus, there is a power imbalance and inequality along these social dimensions between these ethnic collectives and political categories. Furthermore, there are differences within these state and political categories as Malaysians carry with them these ethnic and political labels in every facet of daily living, and ways of being and knowing articulate with each other in specific social contexts and social institutions.

The schooling system, like any social institution, does not exist in isolation. Schooling and education systems are implicated within the wider societal politics (Connell, 1993; Giroux, 1983, 1997; Luke & Gore, 1992; McLaren, 1998; McRobbie, 2000; Tsolidis, 2001). In the Malaysian context, the politics of ethnic identification impinges upon the schooling and education system. However, there are processes of contestation when the students and teachers within a particular schooling site negotiate the discourses of the politics of ethnic identification, discourses of schooling within that site and other discourses in constructing their self-identifications.

I now locate the politics of ethnic identification within one of the important social institutions in Malaysia, the schooling and education system. This study is located within the schooling site. The research site is an urban girls' school and research participants, 16 year old Malaysian schoolgirls. As ethnicity is a defining feature in ways of being and knowing in Malaysia (Lee, 2000; Mariappan, 1996;

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Savaranamuttu, 2001; Wong, 2001), the ethnic composition of students and teachers within a particular site will result in a unique school ethos, which is linked to the politics of ethnic identification. The schoolgirls in this school, other than negotiating the discourses of the school ethos and the discourse of politics of ethnic identification, also negotiate other discourses in constructing ways of being and knowing as Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. One of the research aims is to bring to light the discourses these girls negotiate in constructing their self-identifications within this particular schooling site.

As the researcher, I have been a secondary school teacher and I am a university lecturer in an education faculty. As a Malaysian~Indian~Christian female educator, I too am implicated in this politics of ethnic identification. This will be addressed in the section in Chapter Four, where I interrogate my positionings in relation to the research participants and the wider Malaysian society.

In the next section, I discuss the discourses of the Malaysian education and schooling system. I also link this to the politics of ethnic identification.

2.6 The Malaysian education and schooling system

The Malaysian education system as an important social institution is deeply embedded within the politics of ethnic identification. Education in Malaysia became highly politicised with the implementation of the National Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970 and still remains so. Initially, after independence in 1957 and the ethnic riots in 1969, educational policies were put into place within the education system to correct the social and ethnic imbalance that resulted from the British colonial rule. The

British colonial state's segregation policy in colonial Malaysia not only resulted in a system that had four parallel streams, namely English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil but also created an English-educated elite group which had been socialised into more Westernised ways, separating them from the masses (Lee, 1997).

However, after 45 years of independence, 33 years since the 1969 ethnic riots and the implementation of the National Economic Policy in 1970, the education system is used more as a political tool rather than a means of correcting social inequality and promoting social unity among the Malaysian populace. Education is used to ensure that the Malay ethnic group remains in power. A number of Malaysian educationists have written on the discrepancy between the stated objectives of educational policy and the planned strategies that are outlined for the achievement of these objectives (Lee, 1997, Loo, 2000; Santhirwn. 1997; Selvaratnam, 1988; Singh & Mukherjee, 1993). Singh and Mukherjee (1993) in commenting on the education and national integration in Malaysia state,

> The education system which is portrayed as a unifying force is in its implementation often seen to be divisive. To the *non-Bumiputeras* it appears as preaching one set of beliefs but through its practical strategies lending credence to quite the opposite. Its overriding philosophy of national unity comes into conflict with its other cherished objectives, in particular the advancement of the socio-economic position of the Malays (Singh & Mukherjee, 1993 p.98).

The education system aims to give education to the masses as is noted in the National Philosophy of Education of Malaysia that was formally documented in 1988. According to this State and public discourse on education in Malaysia,

> Education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible

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and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large (Ministry of Education, 1997 p.2).

This official and public discourse reflects an education system that is unbiased. This is also seen in significant changes in the 1990s within the Malaysian education system. A new orientation was given to the school curriculum to realise the spirit and goal of the National Education Philosophy and the workpower needs for the country (Maheswari & Santhiram, 2000). The New Primary School Curriculum and the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum came into effect from this. Currently these curricular are under review by the Ministry of Education together with educationists from the various educational institutions in Malaysia. These new curricular were also in line with global trends in the 1980s and 1990s on "back to the basics", "child-centered curriculum", and the philosophy of developing an "all-rounded individual" (Lee, 2000). Under these curriculum reform efforts, students were supposed to have a wider pool of subjects to choose from so as to give them more flexibility and allow them to learn according to their abilities. The strict division between the Arts and Science streams was abolished. In theory, students can no longer be clearly identified as Science or Arts students. However, in practice many schools continue to restrict subject choices and force students to adhere to traditional Science and Arts combination subjects (Loo, 2000). There was also a shift away from early specialization to a more broad-based type of education (Lee, 2000). However, overarching these public discourses on education is the politics of ethnic identification. As stated earlier, education is used as a political means to maintain the Malay dominancy within the country.

The Malaysian State has tight control on the national education system in terms of a national school curriculum, a national examination system, finance and administration (Lee, 1997). The majority of Malaysian schools are national or public schools that follow a common curriculum and a common set of public exams. (A detailed description of the schooling system in Malaysia is provided ii Appendix B.) The educational system is highly centralised where almost all of the major decisions and policy-making take place at the Ministry of Education in the capital city (Lee, 2001). There is a Malay bias of bureaucracy within the Education Ministry (Lee, 1997) as in all other Government sectors due to the NEP policies. There is very little opportunity for public input regarding the education system. Furthermore government decisions are influenced by the push and pull of demands from different ethnic blocs, voting blocs and various interest groups (Lee, 1997). All state actions necessarily benefit some social interests and disadvantage others.

Due to the NEP policies, the State made two important changes in the education system (Lee, 1997). Starting from 1971, all English-medium schools were phased out and Malay became the sole medium of instruction in all secondary schools within the national system and in all public institutions of higher learning. The Chinese and Tamil primary schools were left intact. The State advocated for a common language that was needed to unite its people and to promote its national identity. It was only in the secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels of education that the Malay medium of instruction was to take place. At present, Government leaders have been stressing that the command of English is necessary for economic advancement. The second major change was the implementation of an ethnic quota in

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admission of students into tertiary education institutions. The Government also introduced various affirmative action policies to reduce inter-ethnic differences in educational attainment such as giving scholarships to *Bumiputera* students and establishing special secondary schools and programmes to prepare *Bumiputera* students for the professional 2nd technical fields. There are residential science schools and junior science colleges that have better physical facilities and smaller student-teacher ratio in comparison to the regular schools. These schools provide the supply *if* suitable *Bumiputera* candidates in the Science and Technology based courses in the Malaysian and overseas universities. The Ministry of Education and universities have matriculation or pre-university foundation courses for *Bumiputera* students. These programs provide *Bumiputera* students with an additional entry route to science and technology based faculties in Malaysian universities. The Malaysian Government used and still adopts these educational policies to control access to higher education because education at the tertiary level is perceived as a means to social mobility (Lee, 1997). This preferential treatment of *Bumiputeras* within the education system has made competition among the *non-Bumiputeras,* especially from the Chinese, very keen.

Islam is also used within the Malaysian education system to maintain the dominancy of the Malay ethnic group. The manifestation of the Islamic influence can be seen in various settings, for example the establishment of Islamic religious schools and an Islamic university. There were 51 religious schools in 1999. These schools are single-sex schools and teach mainly religious knowledge using Arabic language. The International Islamic University was set up in 1983 in line with the global Islamic

revivalism. In the secondary schools, the subject Islamic Studies is compulsory for all Muslim students. The non-Muslim students do the subject, Moral Education. Darwin's evolutionary theory is not taught in schools as it is considered contradictory to the Islamic belief in Allah as the creator of the Universe (Lee, 2001). A study on the textbooks used in Malaysian secondary schools shows that the Malay language and History subjects tend to overplay the role of Malay, Malay culture and traditions, instead of being sensitive to the national needs of unity and integration (Santhiram, 1997).

The Malaysian government also takes into account the educational needs of the other ethnic groups but as stated earlier it is political, always ensuring that its dominancy within the state's machineries and politics is never threatened. Recently, the Government allowed the establishment of the Universiti of Tunku Abdul Rahman that is managed and funded by the Chinese political party. In 1995, there were 1,287 Chinese primary schools and 60 Independent Chinese secondary schools (Tan, 2000a). These Chinese schools are managed and funded by the Chinese business community. There are also Tamil schools, mainly located in the rubber and palm oil estates but the conditions of these schools are deplorable and many lack basic necessities such as libraries, tables and chairs (Jalleh, 2000). Chinese schools in Malaysia have been making much headway in education but Tamil schools have lost their way (Jalleh, 2000).

These various educational policies and contradictory practices have increased ethnic tension and racial polarization among the various ethnic groups instead of promoting social cohesiveness (Lee, 1997). The issue of access to higher education

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was always and is still a point of contention (Lee, 1997). Because of the racial quota system and the limited number of places in public tertiary education institutions, many *non-Bumiputera* students who are just as qualified are denied places locally and are forced to go overseas at a very high cost or seek further education in private institutions (Lee, 1996). This has caused inter-ethnic conflict and increased communal tension (Lee, 1997).

The Malaysian education system that is portrayed as an unbiased system is one full of tensions and contradiction. The main goals of the Malaysian education system, as stated in the National Philosophy of Education, educational documents, policies and educational reforms, are to promote national unity and identity, and to help restructure Malaysian society in terms of redistribution of educational opportunities and wealth (Lee, 1997; Loo, 2000; Singh & Mukherjee, 1993). The educational reforms in the 1990s within the Malaysian schooling system emphasise an education philosophy that advocates the development r,f all-rounded individuals and a school curriculum that is student-centered (Lee, 2000). Yet Malaysian students are immersed in a pedagogy of rote-learning (Loo, 2000; Wong, 2000). The curriculum, pedagogy and major examinations are standardised at the school level. There is a privileging of Science and Technology based subjects over the liberal Arts subjects. Most secondary schools in Malaysia still practice streaming. The schooling system is also very examination oriented yet for the *non-Bumiputeras,* academic excellence is not rewarded by the State. Overarching all aspects of education is the politics of ethnic identification that comes through the affirmative action policy in education for the ethnic majority and a range of other factors that I have described.

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There are strong influences of Islam and the Malay culture in the school curriculum. There are also the global influences of educational reforms on the Malaysian education system.

As Connell (1993) states,

Educatiw systems are busy institutions. They are vibrantly involved in the proHr^tvoii of social hierarchies. Further, education is centrally involved in the uiaticm of social identities for groups who are stake-holders in the system (Connell, 1993 p.27).

How do students contend with these tensions and contradictions within the schooling site? The Malaysian school is one where the state's public discourse of a critical *mid* democratic education system intersects with the politics of ethnic identification as well as the daily experiences of being a student within the school. Students have to negotiate with these discourses as well as those of the ethnic and religious collectives of which they are members.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter on Malaysia provides background for the politics of ethnic identification that are prevalent in both the public and private discourses of being a Mdays^i. There are various past and current social forces at work in the identity formation of a Malaysian, fhere is the historical context of colonial rule premised on division thai brought about the social and economic imbalance of the ethnic groups (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Daud, 1999; Mariappan, 1996). There is the ethnic bargaining during Independence and the 1969 ethnic riots that led to implementation of various -state policies to address this imbalance but in turn led to the further promotion of ethnic politics in Malaysia. Global Islamic revivalism in the 1970s has also affected the

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dynamics of Malaysian society, in particular the representations of Muslims. Ong (1999) describes Islam in Malaysia as a patchwork of the most liberal as well as radical strands of Islam, a collage that is represented in cities by Muslim women in *Ml purdah* mingling with others in body-conscious dresses and jeans. Events in the 1990s including the economic crisis, the arrest of the then Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim as well as the challenges political parties in Malaysia are currently facing, have an impact on Malaysians. Malaysian needs to be understood within a framework of identity and difference, particularly sensitive to ethnicity. Being a Malaysian assumes an essentialistic character due to the public discourses on ethnicity and the ethnic politics. Being a Malaysian is also multiple, shifting and contradictory as various experiences come into play.

In this context, how do Malaysians from various sectors of contemporary Malaysian society concede with the above mentioned events that spill over into the various social institutions? These are events that continuously reaffirm the politics of ethnic identification in Malaysia. What of the younger generation of teenage school students? How do they construct their identities as Malay, Chinese and Indian girls in the midst of these competing and contradictory discourses?

Women constitute an important resource that can be mobilised to achieve the national development agenda. Although 48 per cent of women were in the working age population of 15-64 years, they only accounted for a third of the labour force (Malaysia, 2001). Female labour force participation was 44.5 percent in 2000. Fifty percent of the primary and secondary school enrollment are females (Malaysia, 2001). Females accounted for 66 per cent of the total enrollment at the upper

secondary level. These statistics indicate that Malaysian women and girls are a group that has to be considered seriously in the future working of this nation which still adopts patriarchal ways in the economic, social, religious sectors of society. Is the potential of Malaysian women and girls being fully realised? I am interested in looking at gender identifications of young Malaysian girls in relation to ethnicity as a way of examining this question. As I stated in Chapter One, the statistics on education and employment do not provide an ethnic breakdown as a subgroup of the gender breakdown. How does ethnicity come into play here?

In the next chapter, I draw on feminist theorists working with identity and differences (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauren's, 1987, 1990; Mirza, 1997; Mohanty, 1992; Tsolidis, 2001; Yuval-davis, 1997, 1999) as a way of conceptualising the female identity. I then link this to notions of ethnicity within contemporary Malaysia. In particular I am concerned to examine these issues in relation to schooling. I explore ways of knowing and being girls utilize within a particular school site. The notion of resistance is employed as a means of understanding schooling as a site for processes of self-identifications.

Chapter Three

Gender, ethnicity and schooling

3.1 Introduction

The theoretical framings of the thesis are provided in this chapter. I discuss ways of being a woman as posited by feminists of difference. This is linked to the notion of ethnicity. As discussed in Chapter Two, ethnicity is an integral constituent of the individual Malaysian psyche, and ethnic membership critically demarcates a Malaysian's social life and taste (Lee, 2000; Mohamad & Wong, 2001; Saravanamuttu, 2001). The Foucauldian notion of discourse is used to understand how ways of being women/girls are located within contestations of power, namely patriarchy. The schooling site is used as a specific context to locate ways of being schoolgirls in relation to ethnicity. I discuss how the notion of resistance is a useful analytical tool towards understanding schooling as a social and political site for identity contestations.

3.2 Notions of female identity

Current feminist theorisation replaces universal and essentialist conceptions of female identity with the notion of female identity as multiple, shifting and often contradictory (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1986, 1990; Mirza, 1997; Mohanty, 1992; Tsolidis, 2001; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997). No longer is female identity conceived of in relation to the question of women's difference from men; rather, the question of differences between women become crucial for theorising female identity. Yeatman (1994) states that contemporary feminist theorists working

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within the politics of difference have abandoned binary hierarchical models of difference and use instead complex, multiple notions of differentiation where gender, ethnicity, race and class mediate each other. These current notions of female identity treat gender as the main dimension with interconnections to the dimensions of ethnicity, race and class within specific historical and social contexts (de Lauretis, 1986, 1990; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997). De Lauretis (1986) in conceptualising the female identity describes

> the concept of a multiple, shifting and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations and that one insists on a strategy (de Lauretis, 1986 p.9).

De Lauretis (1986) in defining female subjectivity states that the female subject is a site of differences where sexual, racial, economic or (sub)cultural differences not only come together but are also at odds with one another. In addition to this, a woman's identity is historicised and fluid. Not only is her identity determined by external elements but she herself is part of this historicised and fluid process whereby her identity is created (Alcoff, 1988; de Lauretis, 1986;Tsolidis, 1996). Brah (1996) adds that identity is simultaneously subjective and constituted in and through culture. A woman's identity is the product of her own interpretation and is mediated by the discursive fields available to her.

Contemporary postmodernist feminists of identity and difference (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1986; Mirza, 1997; Tsolidis, 1993, 1996; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997) have set up a muliifaceted conceptual apparatus of a shifting, context-bound, political female gender identity. Scott (1992) reiterates that

subjects are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. Alcoff (1988) explains de Lauretis's notion of agency thus:

> A subjectivity that gives agency to the individual while at the same time placing her within "particular discursive configuration" and, moreover, conceives of the process of consciousness as a strategy. Subjectivity may thus become imbued with race, class, and gender without being subjected to an overdeterminaiion that erases agency (de Lauren's, 1984 as cited in Alcoff, 1988p.425).

She further argues that the agency of subjects is made possible through shifting and multiple forms of consciousness, which are constructed through available discourses and practices but are always open to interrogation through self-analysis. Thus, identity is always grasped and understood within particular discursive configurations and discursive boundaries change with historical conditions (de Lauretis, 1986). The notion of agency then is a sense of engagement in a continuous process, an ongoing constant renewal based on interaction with the v/orld through experience (de Lauretis, 1984). Thus, subjectivity is produced not by external ideas, values or material causes, but by one's personal subjective engagement in the practices, discourses and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning and affect) to the events of the world. Brah (1996) reiterates this notion of agency in the interweaving of experiences and self-identifications. The experience of being a woman would vary according to how she is culturally constructed and this is located within the political repertoire of cultural discourses available to her.

Gender is still considered the defining feature of the female identity but is interwoven with other social dimensions such as ethnicity and class. De Lauretis states that:

> The female subject is en-gendered across multiple representations of class, race, language and social relations...it is also the case that gender is a common denominator: the female subject is always constructed and defined in gender, starting from gender (de Lauretis, 1986 p. 14).

This framing of female gender identity provides an account of how the discourses within which one is located inform the understandings of ways of knowing and being a woman/girl. Meanings of ways of being a woman are produced within discourses. Discourses are structuring principles of society, in social institutions, modes of thought and ways of being (Weedon, 1997). Discourses, in Foucault's work,

> are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon, 1997 p. 105).

Ways of being and knowing are determined through discourses. We learn who we are and how to think and behave through discursive practices. Discourses shape and create meaning systems that impinge upon how we define and organise ourselves, and our social world. Discourses define what it means to be a woman or man and the available range of gender-appropriate behaviour (Weedon, 1999). Power relations are also maintained through discourses. Thus, ways of being woman are embedded within the webs of discourses and power.

While Foucault's notion of the subject has been criticised by feminists as being gender-blind, his concept of discourse have provided feminists with useful analytical tools in their endeavour to understand how women experience and make sense of their social world within such webs of power (Haw, 1998; Ramazanoglu, 1993; Weedon, 1997). Foucault's account of discourse reveals how power is

exercised through discourse, how oppression works and how resistance might be possible (Haw, 1998). As argued for in Chapter One, the notions of patriarchy and resistance are important within various feminisms as these are premised on emancipatory struggle. These notions are understood to permeate all social relations and social institutions. Discourses structure institutional practices and shape ways of knowing and being as a woman. In doing so, they produce and reproduce power relations that are patriarchal (Weedon, 1999).

However, ways of being and knowing as a woman are not just passive effects of discourses and power. As stated earlier, we have agency. There are processes of negotiation and contestation in the interplay of discourses, power and knowledge that constitute and shape our ways of being and knowing.

As argued in Chapter One, experiences are used as a source of knowledge within this framework of identity and difference. There is a need to listen to experience and treat experience as a source of knowledge, in spite of its problematic nature, to understand what and how power relations impinge upon women's lives (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 1999). Each context is understood as providing new ways of theorising female identity. The intricacies of concepts such as gender and ethnicity vary within a specific context. Thus, there is not an essentialistic way of being a woman as has been posited within elements of mainstream feminist theory. Drawing on Fuss's (1989) definition of essentialism as explained on page 5 of this thesis, essentialism assumes that common to all women is a fixed essence. An essentialistic way of being a woman within mainstream feminism assumes there is a fixed and static way of being a woman, namely, that of a white, middle-class woman

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of North America and Western Europe. Mainstream feminism presupposes the European or Western culture as the norm by employing Eurocentric lenses in researching women. A theoretical framework of identity and difference allows a move away from hegemonic Eurocentric feminist lenses to inform the theorising of female gender identity within all contexts as the emphasis is on experiences of women within a particular context or locale.

3.3 Gender and ethnicity

An important facet of my research is ethnicity, as Malaysians have to grapple with the politics of ethnic identification in every facet of their daily life. I examine ways of being and knowing for Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. To do this, I draw upon Yuval-Davis's notion of ethnicity as a political process as discussed in Chapter Two. Yuval-Davis (1997) states,

> Ethnicity is therefore a primarily a political process which coastructs the collectivity and 'its interest' not only as a result of the general positioning of the collectivity but also as a result of the specific relations of those engaged in 'ethnic politics' with others within that collectivity (Yuval-Davis, 1997 p.44).

This notion of ethnicity is complicated and moves away from the traditional notion of ethnicity being static, fixed and dependent on physical and social markers unique to specific ethnic collectivities. In this framework, ethnicity, like gender, is part of a process of identification that is political and shifting in response to context.

Yuval-Davis (1994, 1997) states that gender, class, political and other differences play central roles in the construction of specific ethnic politics, and different ethnic projects of the same collectivity can be engaged in intense competitive struggles for hegemonic positions. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992)

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argue that to posit diversity does not imply the abandonment of static and ahistorical categories of difference but may merely proliferate them. They further add:

> That is why we believe that a historically contingent articulation of gender, ethnicity, race and class must draw on the analytical distinctions between the categories and their social effectivity and begin to theorise particular ways in which they interrelate in different contexts...this does not require that their interrelationship is always the same nor that one division or category is always prioritized...but it does require that we specify the mechanisms by which different forms of exclusion and subordination operate (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992 p.99).

They emphasise that a shift is required in the ways we understand gendered identities to take account of ethnic and racial attributions and identifications.

Yuval-Davis also states that gender relations are at the heart of cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities as well as in most cultural conflicts and contestations. She further elaborates that women affect and are affected by ethnic and national processes (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1994,1997). Women are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honor, both personally and collectively. Women are often constructed as the cultural symbols of the collectivity, of its boundaries, as carriers of the collectivity's 'honour' and as its intergenerational reproducers of culture. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) in linking gender and ethnicity with the state argue that:

> The boundary of the ethnic is often dependent on gender and there is a reliance on gender attributes for specifying ethnic identity; much of ethnic culture is organised around rules relating to sexuality, marriage and the family and a true member will perform these rules properly. Communal boundaries often use differences in the way women are socially constructed as markers (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992 p. 113).

Such markers (for example, expectations about honour, purity, the mothering of patriots, reproducers of the nation, transmiftsrs of ethnic culture) often symbolise the use of women as an ethnic resource (Yuval-Davis& Anthias, 1989). Specific codes

and regulations are usually developed, defining who/what is a 'proper man' and a 'proper woman' which are central to the identities of collectivity members. This notion of a 'proper woman/girl' within specific collectives is contextual as it •: dependent on social and historical contexts. These essentialised notions of the 'proper woman/girl' are based on patriarchal notions of ways of being women. The state and ethnic collectives that are deeply embedded in patriarchy use these essentialistic notions to police women's behaviour and body.

The term patriarchy is used by different feminists in very different ways. Patriarchy was originally seen by antliropologists to mean the power of the father over his kinship (Ramazanoglu, 1989). Since the 1970s with the new-wave of feminist discourse, a new concept of patriarchy was developed as a means of both kte.itifying and challenging men's power over women (Ramazonglu, 1989). This concept of patriarchy is an essential tool in the analysis of gender relations (Ramazanoglu, 1989; Walby, 1989; Weedon, 1997). The concept of patriarchy is also an important tool in looking at the interplay between gender and ethnicity. As argued for earlier, through patriarchy, women are used by the state as symbols and bearers of the ethnic collective's identity and honour. Ramazanoglu (1989) states:

> Patriarchy encapsulates the mechanisms, ideology and social structures, which have enabled men throughout much of human history to gain and to maintain their domination over women (Ramazanoglu, 1989 p.33).

Walby (1989) conceptualises patriarchy as an interlinked system composing the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions such as religion, the media and education. Ramazanoglu (1989) states that while this way of explaining gender inequality

through the intersection of patriarchy, capitalism and racist structures is useful, it does not take inf.') account the specificity and historical context of women. There is a general coi-sensus amongst various feminists, including feminists of colour, that there is inequality between men and women (Walby, 1989). However, feminists of colour (Brah, 1996; Bannerji, 1992; Collins, 1990, hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1991) warn of generalising from the experience of a limited section of white women to that of women as a whole when linking patriarchy to locus of oppression. They argue that there are different sites of oppression for women of different ethnicities. The particular ways in which ethnic and gender relations have inter-acted historically change the forms of ethnic and gender relations (W^y* 1990). Ramazanolgu asserts the importance of context and historicity in conceptualising patriarchy as the locus of oppression:

> We still need to establish much mere clearly how women have come to be in
> the social situations that they are in; how the balance of power between men
> and women is maintained, and what forms resistance has taken and might
> take in the Mature (Ramazanoglu, 1989 p.41).

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) state that the articulation of gender, ethnicity and class within specific social contexts must be emphasised in conceptualising patriarchy as the locus of oppression. There must be an unpacking of the links between the state, the various collectivities of which a woman is a member, and her daily experiences.

The relationship between collectivities and the state is complex and varies in different social and histor>:il contexts (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989), Women are also not just passive recipients and non-participants in interacting with these codes. Women actively participate in the process of reproducing and modifying their roles as

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well as being actively involved in controlling other women (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989). Women undergo constant contestations as they negotiate the discourses of state, ethnic collectivities and their own daily experiences in ways of being women.

Yuval-Davis (1994) state that it is not only in the private domain that gender relationships differ within different groupings. Often the citizenship rights and duties of women from different ethnic groups are different as well. Gender relations differ according to ethnicity (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992). Different ethnic groups have different codes for ways of being women within the particular ethnic collectivities within a nation. This is also dependent on which ethnic collective is the dominant ethnic group within a nation. The dominant ethnic group within a multiethnic nation would also use women in addition to other resources to maintain its stronghold within the nation. Yuval-Davis (1997) states that women in their 'proper behaviour', their 'proper' clothing, embody the line which signifies the collectivity's boundaries.

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) further assert that women's link to the state is complex. They add that women are acted upon as members of collectivities and institutions and as participants in the social forces that give the state its given political projects in any specific historical context.

Being a woman is a complex process as discourses of gender, ethnicity and the state interweave with each other. Ways of being and knowing as women/girls are located v> chin webs of discourses. As argued earlier in this chapter, power relations are sustained and cultivated through discourses, for example dominant discourses of gender and ethnicity within specific societies and ethnic collectives. According to Foucault, discourses always function in relation to power relations. Foucault (1982)

asserts that while individuals are the vehicles of power, power relations have come more and more under state control. He argues that power relations have been progressively governmentalised. Power relations have been elaborated, rationalised and centralised in the form or under the auspices of state institutions. Accordingly, ways of being and knowing as women/girls within specific institutions involve negotiating discourses of gender and ethnicity, and other discourses that are to a great extent sustained through the state's power. However, this does not discount discourses that are sustained through the power relations within that specific site or context that might operate either in harmony or in opposition with the wider societal power relations. The schooling site, an important state and social institution, is a political site where students and teachers, in constructing their self-identifications, negotiate the interplay of state's discourses, the discourses of schooling unique to that social site and other discourses.

In the following section, I examine schooling, a state institution, as a site of identity contestation with particular emphasis on the interplay between gender and ethnicity. I am specifically interested in examining how schoolgirls construct their self-identifications within the schooling site.

3.4 Gender, ethnicity and schooling

Contemporary feminists (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1986, 1990; Mirza, 1997; Tsolidis, 2001; Yeatman, 1994) argue that ways of being woman/girls are located within specific historical and social contexts. Ways of being woman/girl are thus understood as being created in response to a set of circumstances, one of which

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is schooling (Tsolidis, 1996, 2001). Critical educational theorists (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999; Giroux, 1983, 1997; Luke & Gore, 1992; Mac An Ghail, 1994; McLaren, 1998; Tsolidis, 2001) have posited the role of schooling as a significant site for processes of identification. There have also been numerous studies that reinforce the role of the school as a site for identity contestations (Haw, 1998; Kenway & Willis, 1997; Mac An Ghail, 1994; Tsolidis, 1996, 2001; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001; Zin,;, 2000).

Schools function to mediate the social, political and economic tensions of the wider society in complex and contradictory ways (Connell, 1993; Giroux, 1983, 1997; Luke & Gore, 1992; McLaren, 1998; Tsolidis, 2001). Schools do not operate in isolation. The schooling system is located within Hie broader politics of the society. The contestations and negotiations of power that take place at the macro level impinge upon the education system. The education and schooling system are powerful political mechanisms used to maintain the status quo of the dominant groups within a specific society. This comes through the various educational policies implemented within the schooling system. Giro[1]^ (1983) states that the imprint of the dominant collective within a particular society is inscribed in a whole range of school practices such as the official language, school rules, classroom social relations, and the selection and presentation of school knov/ledge. He further adds that this imprint is not simply inscribed or imposed in the consciousness of students. It is always mediated - sometimes rejected, sometimes confirmed. More often than not it is partly accepted and partly rejected. Thus, the schooling system is intertwined with the web of power both at the macro, state level and the micro, personal level.

Giroux (1983) in discussing the usefulness of the notion of power for educational theorising states,

> Power jaust be viewed in part as a form of production inscribed *in* the discourse and capabilities that people use to make sense out of the world - otherwise the notion of power is subsumed under the category of domination and the issue of human agency gets relegated to either a marginal or insignificant place in educational theorising (Giroux, 1983 p.65).

Schools are microcosms of society. Schools as sites of both domination and contestation are thus political sites involved in the construction and control of discourse, meaning and subjectivities (Giroux, 1983). Schools are not neutral institutions that prepare students equally for social and economic opportunities in the wider society (Giroux, 1983).

As stated earlier, the kind of knowledge that is valued in schools is also located within a web of power, one that is patriarchal. Foucault (1982) argues that power and knowledge are inextricably intertwined. The organisation of knowledge with which we are familiar in the school curriculum, is created by particular social processes, and by particular people with particular points of view (Connell, 1993).

In the Malaysian context, as in other societies, the education and schooling system is linked to the political system, which is patriarchal. The school and education system in Malaysia, as discussed in the previous chapter, is inextricably entwined with the politics of ethnic identification. Education acts as a political means to maintain the Malay dominancy within the country. There is also the complex link between gender, ethnic collectivities and the state (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 1994, 1997). Ways of being and knowing within the schooling site entail complicated negotiations with various discourses, for example discourses of gender, ethnicity and schooling.

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The schooling system then is a milieu where the notion of power is located in the interweaving of gender, ethnicity and other social dimensions. As stated earlier, this comes through in the curricula — the language of instruction, the kinds of subjects privileged and the assessment system. The Malaysian context in relation to this was discussed in section 2.6 of the previous chapter, where it was noted that elements of Islam and the Malay culture are manifested through various aspects of the curriculum and education system.

Students bring different histories to school and these histories are embedded in gender, ethnic and other social dimensions that shape their needs and behaviour, often in ways they do not understand or that work against their own interests (Giroux, 1983). Schools are also social sites in which the gender, ethnic and class relationships that characterise the society are played out. School students are located within these social processes where structure and agency come together. Students are not docile subjects, they have agency. This agency is made possible through shifting and multiple forms of consciousness constructed through available discourses and practices (de Lauretis, 1986, 1990).

Schoolgirls in negotiating their self-identifications within the schooling site have to contend with competing and contradictory discourses. Ways of being and knowing are mediated by their histories and backgrounds and are experienced as something that shifts within particular discourses to which they have access. There is the state's discourse on ways of being woman, which is dependent on the dominant collective in power. The various collectivities she is a member of also provide essentialised notions of ways of being women/girls. There are the school's

pedagogical practices that are intertwined with the notion of power, which in turn is linked to nation. As argued earlier, patriarchy is evident in all these discourses. A range of social dimensions including gender and ethnicity, collide and provide schoolgirls with ways of being schoolgirls, and they in turn represent themselves as schoolgirls. .

However, as stated earlier, the social and historical context is an important aspect in examining schooling as a site of identity contestations. This is what makes schooling complicated as each social and historical context is different and thus the interplay of the social dimensions varies.

In researching ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls in relation to schooling in Malaysia, it is necessary to analyse schooling as a social site in which these girls are both constrained and mobilised. As Giroux states,

> Schooling must be analysed as a societal process, one in which different social groups both accept and reject the complex mediations of culture, knowledge and power that give form and meaning to the process of schooling (Giroux, 1983 p.62).

Thus, in the case of the Malaysian context, such an examination of ways of being schoolgirls has to take into account the link between the politics of ethnic identification at the broader societal level, the ethnic collectives themselves and the experiences of daily living.

The notion of resistance, which provides a valuable analytical tool in understanding the link between students, schooling and society, is discussed in the following section.

3.5 The notion of resistance

Resistance theory emerged as a reaction to reproduction theories in education (Giroux, 1983; McFadden & Walker, 1994; Walker, 1986). Reproduction theories developed in the 1970s, and posited schools as reflecting the class structure of society. Schools were seen as utilising their material resources and practices to reproduce the social relations and attitudes that would maintain the social divisions of labour needed for the existing relations of production (Giroux, 1983; McFadden & Walker, 1994). According to Giroux (1983), reproduction theorists such as Bowles and Gintis, Bourdieu and Bernstein maintain that schools perpetuate people's social class positions in society. Social class was seen as the main social dimension in reproduction theory. For example, schools were seen as producing educational outcomes in which the children of working-class parents remain in the working-class, and those children of middle class parents remain in that class.

In the late 1970s, there was a strong reaction to this straightforward idea of social and cultural reproduction through schooling (McFadden & Walker, 1994). Reproduction theories were criticized for being too deterministic (Giroux, 1983; Walker, 1986). They were seen to ignore and oversimplify the complex process of contestation in which there was resistance to schools and teachers, their cultures, and the social structures of school and society (McFadden & Walker, 1994). The seminal work of Willis (1977) in *Learning to Labour* moved forward the debate on schooling being a social and cultural reproduction of the wider society. Willis found that his research group of working-class "lads" from an inner-city English school constructed a counter-culture of which the main elements were drawn from worker resistance

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practices in the factory assembly line where their fathers were employed. The elements of "lad" culture such as "to have a laff", enjoy life and take on a working-class male adult identity were used to obstruct the middle-class values of school (Willis, 1977). He argued that "the lads" resisted the dominant social values and meanings of society, namely one of middle-class and capitalist society, by resisting the form of education that school offered. Ironically, schooling provided "the lads" the opportunity for upward mobility through education. However, in resisting school, the working-class boys cemented their existing class position. Willis's resistance theory was solely premised on class and associated with male behaviour. McRobbie (1978), though drawing partially on Willis's view on resistance, also criticised his work in relation to the connection between resistance and maleness. Willis's "lads" used masculinity to resist the school culture. Resistance in Willis's work was associated with male "acting out" and typically used in relation to male behaviour such as rejection of school, resistance to authority and aggressive confidence in their own vibrant culture. McRobbie (1978) found in the group of working-class and under-achieving British schoolgirls, that they resisted the culture and discipline of schooling through female sexuality in clothes, make-up and going out with boys, and engaging in disruptive school behaviour such as being nide and fighting with teachers. She found in her work on working-class girls in an English high school, that girls' resistance was characterised by a rejection of the school ethos of passivity and femininity.

Willis's romanticisation of resisters, "the lads", was criticised by Walker (1986). McFadden (1995) explains Walker's notion of romanticisation of resistance, thus:

> Walker claims that Willis romanticises working class culture by postulating that whatever the negative and self-defeating actions of working-class people - such as "the lads" - there is at the heart of working class culture a set of pure insights into the oppressive nature of capitalism. This cultural essence, which unconsciously penetrates the masks with which capitalist ideology blurs and hides social reality, is the hope for future change at some opportune moment (Walker, 1986 as cited in McFadden & Walker, 1994 p.5059).

Walker (1993) criticised this romantic hope of the theorist for the working class in their resistance and insists on a conceptualization of a strategic resistance, one that will

> help people construct possibilities for change in their lives by using curriculum and pedagogy to challenge ways of thinking, stereotypes and institutionalised assumptions about social, cultural and even academic constraint (Walker, 1993 as cited in McFadden, 1995 p.298).

The notion of a strategic resistance warrants the unpacking of the link between the student's experiences, schooling and society. McFadden (1995) reiterates this in his argument below:

> My argument is that the theoretical concepts associated with the notion of resistance do not focus on aspects of schooling likely to bring about change in the lives of students because explanations of resistance focus outside on the system, rather than on the individuals whose actions bring about the consequences (McFadden, 1995 p.299).

McFadden and Walker (1994) assert that resistance theory was more useful than reproduction theory because it took account of the capacity of people to make choices about education and other significant options in their liv*-«?. They state that people may choose to reject the status quo and to resist what is dtfimsaided or expected of them, and to disagree with the schooling practices. They further argue.that this is the point where resistance theory becomes problematic, as explanations vary as to what

happens and why. They raise the question: "resistance to oppressive structures is all very well, but to what does it lead?" (McFadden & Walker, 1994 p.5059). McFadden and Walker (1994) reiterate this point:

> What is required is an understanding not just of how and why people resist, but how they can change both themselves and their relations with others and produce new social relations and cultural practices (McFadden & Walker, 1994p.5060).

One of the major problems characterising resistance theories, Giroux (1983), McFadden (1995) and Walker (1986) point out, is the focus on "overt, publicly rebellious acts of student behaviour" (Giroux, 1983 p.246). This focus limits the analysis of resistance behaviour and ignores less obvious forms of resistance among students. As Giroux (1983, p.246) points out, "there are modes of resistance that are quietly subversive in the most immediate sense, but potentially progressive in the long run",

I adopt the notion of resistance to schooling as conceptualised by Giroux (1983) to understand the dynamic relationship between students, schooling and the society of which they are a part. The notion of resistance is used as an analytical tool in making sense of the interweaving ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls and their educational outcomes and their experiences of. schooling. Giroux (1983) posits resistance as a theoretical construct for analyzing the relationship between school and the wider society. He adds that this notion of resistance considers the complex ways in which students mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint.

Giroux (1983) emphasises the sociopolitical significance of resistance. He asserts that central to analysing any act of resistance would be a concern with uncovering the degree to which it seems a form of refusal that highlights either implicitly or explicitly the need to struggle against the social nexus of domination and submission. Resistance must have a revealing function. Resistance must have effects of a progressive nature (Walker, 1988). The analysis of any act of resistance must contain a critique of domination. Giroux (1983) states that to use the notion of resistance with analytical precision,

> one has to either link the behaviour under analysis with an interpretation provided by the subjects who display it or dig deeply into the specific historical and relational conditions out of which the behaviour develops. Only then will the conditions possibly reveal the interest embedded in such behaviour (Giroux, 1983 p. 109).

In analysing any act of resistance, it is imperative then to understand the systemic processes in schools and societies in order to understand how one may achieve emancipatory goals.

Giroux warns that the concept of resistance should not be allowed to become a category indiscriminately applied to every expression of "oppositional behaviour". Oppositional behaviour needs to be analysed to see if it constitutes a form of resistance. This means uncovering the emancipatory motive of oppositional behaviour. Zine (2000) reiterates this point in arguing that oppositional behaviours that have traditionally been classified as resistance, such as truancy or 'acting out', although they may contain certain political imperatives, have yet to prove effective in enacting educational change or emancipation.

Traditional resistance theories are based on the notion that anti-school behaviours are entrenched within class-based motives (Zine, 2000). As discussed

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earlier in this section, resistance theorists (Willis, 1977) have generally used class as the basis for their analysis and explanation. This is of no surprise, as most of the resistance theories come out of a Marxist tradition. For example, the work of McRobbie (1978) on her working-class girls, and Willis (1977) on his working class "lads" have shown that class resistance to school entailed the adoption of working-class definitions of masculinity and femininity. Willis's "lads" used masculinity to resist the school culture. The consequence of working-class student resistance was educational failure and a perpetuation of the social class inequality within the wider societal structure in the British system.

I find the model of resistance as posited by Giroux (1983, 1997) useful and I want to use this model to look at ethnicity specifically in the interplay of gender and ethnicity of Malaysian schoolgirls self-identifications within the schooling site. Traditional resistance theorists (McRobbie, 1978; Willis, 1977) posit resistance as linked to forces of social reproduction based mainly on class structures. Class does exist in Malaysia but ethnicity is a more prominent determining issue in Malaysia. Contemporary analysis of resistance has moved away from an essentialist and classist notion of the causes and modes of resistance to a notion of resistance that is pluralistic in form and is located within the intersections of various social dimensions such as gender, ethnicity and class (Abowitz, 2000). Contemporary notions of resistance take into account the mulipliticity of identity. Zine reiterates this point,

> Various aspects of social difference and oppression intersect and can differentially position and challenge students who embody multiple strands of difference based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, language as well as religion (Zine, 2000 p.300)

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In addition to the sociopolitical significance of resistance as posited by Giroux (1983,1997), the notion of resistance as contestation to multiple forms of domination is also adopted within my analytical framework. Contemporary educational theorists like Brah and Minhas (1985), Fordham (1996), Mac an Ghail (1988), Mirza (1992, 1997), Solomon (1992) and Zine (2000) use other social dimensions such as religion and culture to investigate students' experiences of schooling. There is a need to consider other forms of social difference when theorising resistance (Abowitz, 2000). Zine (2000) points out that resistance is related in complex ways to various social dimensions at the same time:

> Class-subordination does not represent the only type of systemic oppression; race, ethnicity and religious identity are alternate social locations for resisting ideological domination and the structural hierarchy of knowledge, which disempower and subvert the progress of certain groups in society (Zine, 2000 p.300).

Zine (2000) stresses the necessity to redefine and redesign the notion of resistance on the basis of non-class-based social action and critique. She adds,

> Redefining resistance involves rupturing the exclusivity of classist, structuralist designs on resistance theory yet still maintaining the attendant principles oi"its theoretical premise. In particular, this related to the notion of a social and political critique embedded in specific forms of action, which are then qualified as resistance (Zine, 2000 p.296).

Resistance is conceptualised as emancipatory struggles against domination and submission. Thus, linked to the notion of resistance are power and discourse. Power is never uni-dimensional. Giroux (1983) claims that power is exercised not only as a mode of domination but also as an act of resistance or even as an expression of a creative mode of cultural and social production outside the immediate force of domination. Foucault's notion of discourse is linked to power and resistance. Discourses produce subjects within relations of power that potentially involve

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resistance. This notion of discourse provides an analytical tool for understanding how power is exercised through discourse, how oppression works and how resistance might be possible (Haw, 1998;Ramazanoglu, 1993; Weedon, 1997).

As argued earlier, schoolgirls are exposed to various discourses that are not necessarily compatible. The understandings of ways of knowing and being a woman/girl come from the contestations of these competing and at times contradictory discourses. Schoolgirls have to mediate and make sense of these contesting discourses and meanings in constructing their own ways of being and knowing within the school. Kenway and Willis (1997), emphasising the role of discourses in self-identifications, state that ways of knowing and being are shifting and fragmented across the various discourses, which historically and currently constitute people's lives and their sense of self. As the schoolgirls are located within a complex network of discourses, they are offered many ways of being, which they can either take up or resist. The ways in which schoolgirls mediate and react to structures of power as they construct their gendered self-identifications can be brought to light through the notion of resistance.

Giroux's notion of resistance is compatible with the notion of ways of being woman/girl that is posited by feminists of difference. Differences along the social dimensions of gender, ethnicity and class are emphasised within this notion of resistance. Equally emphasised are the notions of power and inequality. Various feminisms interrogate these notions through the concepts of patriarchy and oppression. Giroux states that,

> central to analyzing any act of resistance would be the concern with
> uncovering the degree to which it speaks to a form of refusal that highlights,
> either implicitly or explicitly, the need to struggle against which the social

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nexus of domination and submission. In other words, resistance must have a revealing function, one that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and for struggle in the interests of self-emancipation and social emancipation (Giroux, 1983 p. 109).

Giroux's notion of resistance is linked to emancipation, power and domination. He further emphasises the importance of social and historical contexts when using these concepts to analyse resistance. Oppression is also linked to social emancipation in various feminisms.

Because of its ability to take account of the aforementioned dimensions of social inquiry, resistance is a useful way of understanding schooling as a site of identity contestation. The notion of resistance as posited by Giroux is also compatible with the idea of change and emancipation that is important within various feminisms. As feminists, we learn in order to change. As Lather (1991) states, feminists conduct research to develop emancipatory knowledge. This is to bring to light the axis of oppression within a social context and to better understand inequalities and the power dynamics within that particular context. Feminists of colour (Brah, 1996; Bannerji, 1992; hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1991) have argued that there are different sites of oppression for different groups of women. They also emphasise the multifaceted nature of oppression. This is contextual and is dependent on the 'historically specific material reality of groups of women'. Thus, class cannot be adopted as the only social dimension along which to analyse resistance, as it is in traditional theorisations.

The specificity of the social context within which resistance and oppression are theorised is important, as the individuals and discourses at play would vary. The politics of ethnic identification involving the Malays, Chinese and Indians in

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contemporary Malaysia provides an opportunity for the conceptualisation of resistance and oppression within a non-Eurocentric context. Most of the research on school-based resistance comes out of Western societies such as those of England (Brali & Minhas, 1985; McRobbie, 1978; Mirza, 1992; Willis, 1977), Australia (Matthews, 2002; Walker, 1993) Canada (Soloman, 1992; Zine, 2000), America (Fordham, 1996).

3.6 Conclusion : The Malaysian context

Feminists of difference have conceptualised ways of being women as multiple, shifting and contradictory. Tne process of self-identification is an on-going process of one's interpretation and reworking of her social positions and of the meanings given to these positions through discourse. Ways of being women/girls are also context-bound and political. Thus, each social and historical context will provide different theorising on ways of being women/girls. What and how does the Malaysian context play a role in theorizations of Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls self-identifications that rely on these understandings and are based on the expression of experiences of these girls as well as the researcher? How does the discourse of ethnicity impinge on these girls' self-identifications? I examine these issues in relation to the gender identifications of Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls within a particular site, the school.

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the politics of ethnic identification is prevalent in every facet of society. Ethnicity is used as a political tool by the state and the ethnic collectivities in Malaysia. The state apparatus in Malaysia privileges

the discourse of ethnicity. The ethnic collectivities might privilege the discourse of gender, as argued by Yuval-Davis (1994, 1997). Thus, ethnicity is an important social dimension in researching ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. The relationship between gender and ethnicity is also one that shifts. As posited by Yuval-Davis (1994,1997), gender is ethnicised and ethnicity is gendered. The politics of ethnic identification brings about social and economic inequality in Malaysia. There is also the prevalence of patriarchy in every social and political institution in Malaysia. Thus, power in the Malaysian context is not only embedded within gender relations, equally important is the politics of ethnic identification. This interweaving between gender and ethnicity is also seen in the schooling site. The intersection of gender and ethnicity will create different interpretations of ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls within the groups of ethnic girls in the schooling site.

Schooling is an institutional practice where students' identities are constructed through processes of negotiation. Schools are sites where students struggle over meanings and practices. Feminists of difference and critical educational theorists argue that schooling experiences are located within different and contradictory discourses of gender, ethnicity and other social dimensions. Schooling as a social and political site is also linked to the wider society through the nexus of power that operates at the state level as well as dominant collectivities within the nation.

As examined in Chapter Two, the Malaysian education and schooling system is one where the state's public discourse of education intersects with the politics of ethnic identification of contemporary Malaysia. Students have to negotiate these discourses as well as those operating within their specific ethnic collectivities. I use

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the Foucauldian notion of discourse to understand ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls in a Malaysian schooling site. This approach has been used to understand gendered self-identifications in the schooling context. Feminists (Haw, 1998; Kenway & Willis, 1997, Walkerdine, 1990) have found the notion of discourse as posited by Foucault a useful analytical tool in understanding the operations of gender and power within the schooling site. This has been lised by Haw (1998) and Walkerdine (1990), in relation to the British context, and Kenway and Willis (1997) in relation to the Australian context. I will be using it in relation to the Malaysian context, where the politics of ethnic identification involving the Malays, Chinese and Indians adds a unique dimension. The Malaysian context has the potential to provide insights on theorising on ways of being and knowing as women/girls in relation to the notion of resistance and ethnicity. The intra and inter ethnic dynamics between the Malay, Chinese and Indian collectivities problematises notions of gender and ethnicity and resistance. This is further complicated by the politics of ethnic identification, which favour the ethnic majority of Malays and partially function on a symbiotic relationship between the Malay and Chinese ethnic collectivities. This discourse of ethnicity permeates every social institution, including the schooling system in Malaysia. Due to this complexity in the inter and intra ethnic dynamics, each context within the Malaysian situation, for example the schooling site with a particular student and teacher ethnic and gender composition, and a specific locale will provide a different theorising of ways of being and knowing.

Ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls in contemporary Malaysia would vary and are located within the discourses available to them. There

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would be different and similar discourses to which schoolgirls from these three ethnic collectivities have access. The manner in which the girls negotiate these discourses would also vary for girls within and between these ethnic groups. For example, a Malay schoolgirl, in having agency in ways of being will be located within particular discourses for example, the discourses of Malay femaleness which is interlinked with Muslimness, discourses of education and schooling and other discourses. This would also apply to Chinese and Indian girls, although the content of discourses of gender and ethnicity would vary. These discourses would also be mediated by these girls' social, economic and educational backgrounds. The politics of ethnic identification is intertwined with the discourses the girls have access to. Ways of being a Malaysian woman/girl would then shift according to the discourses they are located within and have access to. Ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls would be located within the interplay between the macro (the state and ethnic collectivities and other social institutions) and micro (personal daily experiences of ways of being and knowing). This thesis aims to bring to light the manner in which ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls are strategic and political. The notion of resistance is used in this thesis to unpack the link between the macro and micro. It is used as an analytical tool to investigate how these girls negotiate these discourses in their self-identifications within the schooling site.

Most of the resistance theories come out of a Marxist model (Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1988). These traditional notions of resistance posit class as the sole locus of oppression. Research on school resistance (Willis, 1977; McRobbie, 1978, 2000) is strongly linked to class. I am not negating the issue of class in the conceptualising

of resistance. However, in my research I want to look primarily at ethnicity as this social dimension is an important aspect of one's self-identification in Malaysia, as argued in Chapters One and Two. As discussed earlier in this chapter, contemporary analysis of resistance emphasise the sociopolitical significance of resistance in contesting multiple forms of domination (Fordham, 1996; Giroux, 1983; Solomon, 1992; Zine, 2000). I find the model of resistance as posited by Giroux (1983, 1997) a useful analytical tool in examining the interplay of gender and ethnicity of Malaysian schoolgirls self-identifications within the schooling site.

In researching ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls, as the researcher, I intend to bring to light through emancipatory knowledge (Lather, 1991) the nexus of power, oppression and resistance in the interweaving of these schoolgirls' self-identifications and their experiences of schooling within the Malaysian context. I use the intertwining of gender and ethnicity to analyse resistance among these groups of schoolgirls. The resistance belongs to the schoolgirls. What are the Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls resisting? What forms does this resistance take? What is the locus of oppression for these girls? What is the link between these girls' senses of self, their experiences of schooling and resistance? These questions will be addressed in depth in Chapter Nine after the presentation of the fieldwork materials in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.

In the next two chapters, I describe the methods of research I used with this group of Malaysian schoolgirls. I also describe the research site and the schoolgirls in detail.

Chapter Four

Researching Malaysian schoolgirls

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research process, explaining the research methodology and research methods used in this study. Harding (1987) defines methodology as a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed and method as a technique or a way of proceeding in gathering evidence. In the first section, I describe how the theoretical frameworks of this research are applied in this study. I interrogate my own positionings in relation to the research participants, the 16 year-old schoolgirls and Malaysian society. I also describe the techniques and procedures I used in this study.

An important tenet driving this research is that research is never neutral. I do not pretend that this research is an atheoretical or apolitical text: such a project would be neither possible nor desirable (Spivak, 1983).

4.2 The **research framework**

Just as there are various feminisms, there are various feminist methodologies and methods (Griffiths, 1995; Reinharz, 1992). Harding (1987) argues that there is not a distinctive feminist method of research. Lather (1991) states that to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one's inquiry. She adds,

> Through the questions that feminism poses and the absences it locates, feminism argues the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness, skills and institutions as well as in the distribution of power and privilege (Lather, 1991 p.71).

However, as posited by feminists of difference (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1984, 1986, 1990; Mohanty, 1988, 1991; Spivak, 1990, 1993; Tsolidis, 1996,2001; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997), this does not deny the interaction of the powerful social forces of ethnicity, class and other social dimensions in the construction of our lives.

Harding (1987) characterises three aspects of feminist social analysis. The jfirst is to put women's perspectives of their own experiences of their social world at the center of feminist research. Secondly, the ethnic, class, culture and gender assumptions, beliefs and behaviours of the researcher must be placed within the research framework. Harding (1987) reiterates that the researcher should appear not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests. And thirdly, the beliefs and behaviours of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for or against the claims advanced in the results of the research. Thus, issues of power dynamics and reflexivity are crucial to feminist research. Not only do the power dynamics between the research participants and researcher affect the ways in which the research is carried out but they play a vital part in the interpretations of the research materials. The recognition that power and power dynamics informs our interpretation of research data is necessary to feminist methodology so as to bring to light the inequalities in social processes and contexts (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994). They state:

> The validity of our interpretations depends on the integrity of the interaction
> of our personal experiences with the power of feminist theory and the power,
> or the lack of power, of the researched. Our conclusions should always be
> open to criticism (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994 p. 146).

Reflexivity as a continual and honest consideration of the ways in which the researcher's own social identity and values affect the data gathered and the picture of the social world produced has been a paramount project within feminism (Reay, 1996a).

The research methodology and research methods must be compatible with the theoretical framework and the research questions posed in the study. There has to be a reciprocal relationship between theory and data. Lather (1991) states

> Data must be allowed to generate propositions in a dialectical manner that permits use of a priori theoretical frameworks, but which keeps a particular framework from becoming the container in which the data must be poured (Lather, 1991 p.62).

Feminist research entails empirical evidence being viewed as a mediator for a constant interrogation between self and theory (Lather, 1991).

This thesis employs a "Malaysian feminist" research framework in conceptualising ways of being women/girls, which emphasises the notions of identity and difference where gender, ethnicity and other social dimensions mediate each other. As discussed in Chapter One, experiences of the Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls and myself as the researcher, are the source of knowledge in this thesis, which examines ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian girls within the school as an institutional practice. As argued earlier, experience, in spite of its problematic nature, is the source of knowledge in feminist research. This source of knowledge is necessary for understanding how people experience the varying material, social, cultural, political and embodied conditions of their lives (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 1999). Scott (1992) argues that experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward. Experience is always contested and therefore political. In using experience as a

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source of knowledge in the research process, it is vital to emphasis the discursive nature of experience and the politics of its construction (Scott, 1992). Feminist researchers (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 1999; Lather, 1991; Mohanty, 1992; Scott, 1992) argue that reflexivity and interrogation of the researcher's positionings within the research can overcome the problematic tendency for experience to be seen as essentialistic and universalistic. Ramazanoglu and Holland (1999) reiterate this point, that in connecting theory, experience and judgment, the knowing feminist should be accountable for the sense she makes of her own and other people's accounts and how her judgments are made.

A feminist research framework acknowledges that there is no neutral, objective or value-free research (Holland & Ramazanolgu, 1999; Lather, 1991). This thesis is reflexive as I interrogate my own positionings in the research process; from the conceptualisation of the research to the fieldwork to the interpretation of the research materials to the writing up of the thesis. This brings to light the ways in which the researcher's values and positionings enter into research. I theorise the ambivalences and tensions I face in being a Malaysian researcher looking at ways of being girls/women in Malaysia, where ethnicity is an important social and political marker in one's self-identification.

My fieldwork was done in an environment where I am most comfortable and familiar with the school and schoolgirls - as I am a Malaysian educator. I was a secondary school teacher and I am a university lecturer in the field of educational studies. There is all the more reason to interrogate my positionings due to the

closeness of the subject matter and research participants to my heart and mind. As

Du Bois (1983) emphasises:

> The closer our subject matter to our own life and experience, the more we
> can probably expect our own beliefs about the world to enter into and shape
> our work - to influence the very questions we pose, our conception of how to
> approach those questions, and the interpretations we generate from our
> findings (Du Bois, 1983 p.105).

Each researcher brings particular values and particular self-identities to the research

and has lived through particular experiences (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994).

4.3 My positionings in the research

In this section, I interrogate my positionings in the research in relation to the

Malaysian society, especially in the context of the politics of ethnic identification. I

also do this in relation to the power dimensions in my relationship and interactions

with the re3earch participants, the 16 year-old schoolgirls.

4.3.1 "Strategic essentialism"

I have lived all my life in Malaysia except for these years of doing my PhD in

Australia. I am of Indian ethnicity, which is a minority ethnic group in Malaysia, and

a Christian, which is a minority religion. I have experiences in being part of the ethnic

politics within the Malaysian education system both as a student and as an educator.

I am both familiar with and affected by the practices, institutions and policies.

I do feel marginalised at times due to the fact that I am a Malaysian-Indian,

an ethnic group in Malaysia which is lagging behind in all social aspects in relation

to the Malays and Chinese. I am part of an ethnic collective that does not have

significant political and governmental power like the Malays or economic power

like the Chinese. Yet at the same time I am considered an elite having come through such a system to be an academic.

There are some ambivalences in my positionings within this research in relation to the wider Malaysian society and, more specifically the research participants, the schoolgirls. I have collective experience in being a Malaysian as I have been an active citizen.. Yet in relation to the ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and even the Indians, differences within these groups can also be identified along the social dimensions of class, religion, and so on. I have turned to Spivak's (1990,1993) nodon of strategic essentialism as a way of dealing with this high degree of complexity. Spivak (1993) argues that one has to look at where the person is situated when one makes claims for or against essentialism. She further adds that a strategy suits a situation, a strategy is not a theory. In looking at myself as a Malaysian researcher through Spivak's concept, these are some of the issues that emerge. I can identify with the Chinese and Indians, as we are minority groups who are constantly subjected to the politics of ethnic identification and the affirmative action policy that favours the ethnic majority. In the same instance I can also identify with the Malays even though I am from a minority ethnic group, since like the Malays, the Indians have less economic power in comparison with the Chinese. That notion of strategic essentialism shifts according to situations. My positioning as an academic privileges me. My own positioning is multiple, shifting and contradictory. My positionings are also strategic and political. My ethnic and academic positioning as an Indian minority, yet a privileged academic, has been evoked strongly in the research project.

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My positionings in this research are complicated. I grapple with the complexity of claiming the state-prescribed identity of a Malaysian~Indian~Christian female educator within contemporary Malaysia which functions within the politics of etl*tnfc* identification at every level of daily life. I have shared a certain sense of collective experience in being an active citizen. Yet I am in a privileged situation by virtue of my academic status. Ways of being and knowing as the researcher are multiple, continually reconstructed and reconstituted in each new context and situation. I have attempted, as Spivak (1990) argues, to 'unlearn my privilege' by interrogating my positionings in this research project. My positionings as a Malaysian educator and researcher affected what I did in the field as did my Indian, Christian background. This issue will also be revisited in the concluding chapter as I reflect on what the analysis tells me about my research positionings.

4.3.2 The power dynamics

I am fully aware of the hierarchy in the positionings between this group of schoolgirls and me. This included the age gap, and the different life experiences. They were schoolgirls and I, the experienced academic and educator. There was also the status of being the researcher in relation to the research participants. I made every conscious effort, as Alcoff (1991) and Lather (1991) advocate in any research process, to facilitate conditions for dialogue and to speak with and to rather than speak for others. I took steps to build a trusting and reciprocal relationship with the girls. I gave them the opportunity to address me in any manner that they wished to. Most of them addressed me by my first name. Some called me 'Ms Cynthia' and some 'teacher'. Towards the end of the fieldwork, almost all addressed me by my first name. I

attended some of their birthday parties and festive celebrations at home upon their invitation. I was also invited on some, of the girls' shopping and outdoor trips. Some of them also shared their personal problems with me and asked for my advice on personal and academic matters. I would always try to acknowledge their feelings, never belittling them. These occasions indicate to a certain extent that a trusting relationship did develop between the girls and me. I also spent some time during the early stages of the research process getting to know them and giving them the opportunity to know me. My status changed from that of a stranger at the initial stages of the research to that of a friend to a certain degree.

I also acknowledge that as the researcher in a study I was in a privileged situation. Reciprocity was only possible to a certain extent in this research in establishing relationships. Lather (1991) states that reciprocity implies give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power. She further adds that reciprocity operates at two primary points; the junctures between researcher and researched and data and theory. Regarding the juncture between the research and research participants, I conducted the interviews in an interactive and dialogic manner (Lather, 1991) that requires self-disclosure on the part of the researcher. I provided some form of feedback in terms of initial analysis to the girls through the group interviews. However, the power dimensions are evident in the following contexts that emerge.

The girls for this research were volunteers from the highest achieving class and the two lowest achieving classes. I chose these two ends of the academic performance spectrum as I wanted to see the link between ways of being Malay,

Chinese and Indian girls and schooling in a society which places emphasis on academic achievement as a means of social mobility.

I made known to these girls that I was a lecturer from the School of Educational Studies at Universiti Sains Malaysia. I told them I was on study leave from that position to pursue my PhD at Monash University in Melbourne; Australia. I explained that I was in the school to do my PhD research and I wanted to understand their experiences of being Malaysian girls as well as their experiences of schooling. With this initial self-introduction, I had already set up a power structure where I was a Malaysian academic and experienced educator with experiences of an Australian academic life. Most of them were quite impressed - firstly because of my academic status and secondly because of my Western overseas exposure. I had privileged my position to these girls. In a society that is status conscious and places a high value on Western education, I was perceived by the girls as someone smart and elite. The girls from the highest achieving class (78% of the class were Chinese girls) were quite impressed when they asked me if I was on an Australian scholarship and I told them that I was. When I look back at my field notes, I realise I wanted to set up common identification with the girls from the highest achieving class in terms of academic achievement. I sometimes wonder how they would have reacted if I was a Malaysian schoolteacher doing a PhD (which would have to be written in the Malay language) at a Malaysian university. I might also have alienated the girls from the low achieving class in describing my academic experiences at the initial stages of the study. This could also have been one of the reasons as to why it was the girls from the lowest achieving classes who addressed me initially as 'teacher' or 'Ms Cynthia' instead of

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'Cynthia' as the girls from the top achieving class would. However, most of the girls in the lowest achieving classes shared a number of .their personal problems with me, just as the girls from the highest achieving class did. These statements from some of the girls in the lowest achieving class indicated that they did accept me as a friend to a certain extent: 'whatever I want to say I say', 'you understand teenagers...that I can tell you'.

I had Malay, Chinese and Indian girls from the highest achieving and lowest achieving classes volunteer for my research project. In terms of ethnic identification, I identified with the Indians as being one of those lagging behind at the societal level. Yet there were positions of privilege when taking into account the class factor. I identified more with the Indian girls in the highest achieving class as I was in such a position in my schooling and university days. I also used to impress upon Priya, the Indian girl from the best class who was not performing well, the importance of doing well. I also did this with the girls from the other classps but did not insist on the matter so much. I still remember getting frustrated when these girls told me that they were rather happy being where they were in terms of their academic achievement. I wanted them to realise that they would have more choices if they had higher academic grades. I was using my educational values and experiences to advise them. The power dimension comes into play again.

With the Chinese girls, I could identify with their frustrations at an education system that while emphasizing high grades did not reward them by giving them the scholarships. 73.8% of the girls from the best class are Chinese and most of the top students are Chinese (the top 20 academic positions in the form were Chinese,.though

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the number 3 position was occupied by a Muslim girl). Yet in spite of this, they had more options in comparison with the Indian girls, as a number of them had financial power whereby they could go into private higher education system or even overseas. Those who could not afford to go into the private higher education or overseas knew that it was only through getting high grades that they might have a better chance of getting to do the course of their choice at university. They were more aware of the importance of education in comparison to the Indians and Malays.

With the Malay girls, I knew the ones in the highest achieving class would have opportunities at scholarships even though they were performing as well as the Chinese girls. It was the Malay girls in the weaker class who felt marginalized because of the fact that they were in that class. I used to advise them on suitable studying strategies.

I would always try to acknowledge the particpants' feelings but I would also try my very best to make them aware of the importance of academic achievement to their future opportunities. I did not imagine they could score the maximum number of As, however, felt that they should be trying their hardest, as they were sitting for a major public examination that would basically determine their future. I understand the importance of academic results in the Malaysian education system and I was letting the girls know that with high grades they would have more life choices. This indicated that I was bringing in my own values and experiences of the importance of high grades into this research.

I also assumed the role of a relief teacher during my fieldwork. The power issue came into play because the girls required my permission whenever they wanted

to leave the class. I would also ask them to reduce their noise level lest they interrupted the neighbourin. classes. This reinforced the power I had as an adult even though this was less power than the other adults had in the school.

I went into the field with the aim of making concerted efforts to reduce the differences in the power dimensions between this group of schoolgirls and myself. The power dimensions in any research can never be fully resolved. What is imperative in any feminist research, as argued earlier, is the critical interrogation of the particular power and discursive effects involved in researching others (Alcoff, 1991; Spivak, 1990,1996). As the researcher, in being reflexive and in interrogating my positionings in this research, I bring to light the way in which aspects of my identity have impinged upon this research. The researcher, being gendered, ethniciscd and classed, influences the research direction and outcomes (Alcoff, 1991, Lather, 1991, Narayan, 1997).

4.4 What I did in the field and why I did it

In this section, I address the selection process for the school, and the methods I used in this research. As stated earlier, the personal plays a role in the choice of the research topic and research questions. The personal also plays an important part in the choice of the research site and research participants.

4.4.1 The selection process

I did my fieldwork from June 2000 to December 2000 in one of the girls' schools in the state of Penang in Malaysia. Prior to returning to Malaysia for my fieldwork, I had to obtain permission from the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the Penang

State Education department to conduct my research in the Penang schools. I chose this state of Penang because I was familiar with the state. Penang is my home base. I completed my undergraduate and Masters studies at thi IJniversiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. I worked as a lecturer for three and a half years at the School of Educational Studies at this university. As a faculty member, I was familiar with a number of the schools and staff members in the state due to the close cooperation between the faculty, schools and state education authorities. With the limited time as well as financial constraints of the PhD scholarship and the status of an International Postgraduate in Australia, I had to strategise in terms of the most efficient time needed to locate myself within a school. I had seven months of fieldwork. This was also constrained by the schooling session in Malaysia. The school term officially started at the beginning of the year arid ended in November each year. There is a mid-term break in the middle of the year. As I began my PhD in April, I could only begin on my fieldwork the following year due to the preparations towards the research proposal. The next best option was to begin the fieldwork in June of the middle of the following year.

My fieldwork started with visits to six schools over a period of two weeks. A number of factors led me to the decision of visiting these six schools initially. The degree of cooperation and familiarity from the gatekeepers, namely the principals and the deputy principals of the school was an important factor. I knew some senior teachers in these schools through joint projects between the university faculty I was attached to and these schools. The student ethnic composition of the schools was also established as a means of selecting schools for the research. The focus of my

research is the interplay of gender, ethnicity and schooling in the self-identifications of Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. The inter- and intra- ethnic dynamics between the girls is also an important aspect of my research. I also chose these six schools for their mixed student ethnic composition and for the diversity of students' socioeconomic backgrounds. Most of the other schools on the island of Penang had either mainly Malay students or Chinese students. After the initial two weeks, I located myself in two schools, a girls' school and a mixed sex school as the principals in these two schools gave me more time with the students in comparison with the other schools. I still had not decided at that stage whether I wanted to do my fieldwork in a single sex or mixed sex school. Finally, I decided to locate myself in the girls' school, Parkview Girls' Secondary School, as I had more time access to the girls in this school in comparison to the mixed sex school. The principal and some of the senior teachers also knew me from the university's research team which had conducted a research project with the junior cohort of girls in this school. They allowed me to be in the school every day in comparison to the other school, that only allowed me one day a week there.

Parkview Girls Secondary School had a student population of 1024 girls in June 2000. 38.9% of the student population are *Bumiputera,* 42.9% Chinese, 15.5% Indians and 2.6% Others. This school also had girls from various backgrounds, with parents ranging from surgeons, bank managers to technicians and hawkers.

My research focuses on 16 year-old schoolgirls who are in Form Four. The choice of the research participants was dependent on existing education policies on school-based research in Malaysia as well as the aims of this research study. The

Malaysian Ministry of Education has a ruling on school-based research that students from the examination forms, Forms Three, Five and Six, cannot be involved in research projects as this would interrupt their study routine. I also chose 16 year-old Form Four girls as they are at a crucial stage in terms of their schooling, as they would be sitting for a major public examination that would determine their future educational and career paths. As argued in Chapters One and Two, an important aspect of my research is linking ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian girls to educational outcomes within the schooling site.

I specifically targeted girls from the highest and lowest achieving classes for my research. Since academic ranking is common practice in most secondary schools in Malaysia, I wanted to examine the link between this pedagogical practice and ways of being 'Malays', Chinese and Indian girls. I asked for volunteers from these classes and asked these girls to get their parents' consent in accordance with Monash University Ethnics procedures. I also spoke to the girls about my research project and myself, and what their involvement in the project would entail. I had 15 girls (5 Malays, 8 Chinese and 2 Indians) from the best academic class in Form Four, Science A. I also had girls from the two lowest achieving classes, Arts B and Arts C. 12 girls (9 Malays and 3 Indians) from Arts C and 7 girls (1 Malay, 2 Chinese and 4 Indians) from Arts B volunteered for the research.

When it comes to negotiating respondents' participation, it is often difficult to gain insights into what potential respondents think about a particular study (Phoenix, 1995). In this section, I attempt to gain some insights as to the reasons these 34 girls volunteered for my study. I draw on my own reflections as well as what some of the

girls told me in the individual interviews. The method of gaining research participants for this study was through the process of volunteering. From the onset of this study, I aimed to build a friendly rapport with the research participants. I knew that there would always be power dynamics in the relationship between the schoolgirls and me, due to my positionings. I had to take steps that I could to reduce these power dynamics, though it is impossible to eliminate them entirely. Giving the girls the choice to participate in the study formed the basis of a cordial relationship. The girls had the ultimate power to refuse to be involved in the study. The girls involved in this study would also have to give up some of their free time in school, since participation in the study involved writing free-format essays, individual and group interviews. It was not a matter of giving up just one or two hours, but a total of about ten hours. This included an average of six hours for the individual interviews, an hour for the group interview and two hours for the free-format essays. I felt that no schoolgirl would have wanted to be involved in the study unless she did so of her own accord.

Initially I had 23 out of the total 42 girls in 4 Science A volunteer for the study. This number shrank to 15 as some of them withdrew after the first two weeks of the fieldwork in their school. Some had parents who did not consent to their daughters being involved in the study and some did r;vt write the free-format essay on their experiences of being a girl. As will be explained further on in this section, these essays were an important bridging research mechanism with the individual interviews. I did not pursue the individual or group interviews with those girls who had volunteered initially but did not write the essays. I told them during the explanation of the study that being involved in the study entailed them writing two

free-format essays, one on experiences of being a girl and the other on their experiences of schooling, individual and group interviews, and observations in the school. Most of the top achieving Chinese girls in this class did not volunteer. The top student, who is a Chinese girl, volunteered. The other Chinese girls in 4 Science A who volimteered were academically ranked 12,17,23,24 out of the total 200 in the form. I asked some of the 4 Science A girls who were part of the study the reasons their other classmates did not want to participate in the study. One of the girls said 'oh, they don't have a life, they are always studying, these lot never get involved in anything'. During my informal discussions with the some of the teachers, they told me that time was very important for the 4 Science girls and that I would find difficulties getting volunteers from that class. These teachers advised me to focus more on the low achieving classes.

Some of the girls from 4 Science A indicated in the individual interviews that they became involved in this study out of curiosity. Some used the chance to express their opinions. Others felt that it provided them an opportunity to get out of class. The following comments made by some of the 4 Science A girls are illustrative of some of these points:

> It is not everyday this happens to people and being involved in the project is more adventurous as their lives in Parkview Girls Secondary School is boring (Yen Ling of 4 Science A).

> It is a way to get out of class (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

> It is out of curiosity (Yoke Lin of 4 Science A).

> We love to do something else (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

> I got satisfaction in being able to express myself (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

> I was able to vent my anger (Yoke Lin of 4 Science A).

All of the girls in 4 Arts C were interested to be part of the study. However, when they found out that about the essay writing, I only had 12 out of a total 29 girls volunteer for the study. With the 4 Arts B girls, most of them were not keen on being part of the study. Most of the girls from the low achieving classes said in the individual interviews that being involved in the study gave them an opportunity to talk about their personal and study problems. They said that I had helped them in some way. I remember one of the girls in 4 Arts C telling her classmates: 'tell her all your problems, she can help solve it, she is a counselor'. I had told the schoolgirls in all three classes, when I first introduced myself that I lectured in the area of Educational Psychology at Universiti Sains Malaysia before embarking on my PhD at Monash University. I had to explain again and emphasise the fact that I was neither a counselor nor a psychologist. I had to remind them that I was there to do the study so as to understand what it was being a schoolgirl from their perspectives and experiences. The following comments by some of the girls in the low achieving classes are illustrative of some of the reasons the girls volunteered for the study:

> I came into this project to fill my free time (Hasniza of 4 Arts C).
>
> I came into this project to overcome my problems (Azlinar of 4 Arts C).
>
> Maybe to help me in my problems (Zakiah of 4 Arts C).
>
> Someone to talk to (Shanti of 4 Arts B).

There was a complex range of research participants' reasons for taking part in a study. This group of 34 schoolgirls had their own, varied reasons for taking part in this study. These included simple curiosity, desire to talk and to be listened to, to complain about various aspects of their lives.

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Social dimensions such as ethnicity, gender and class sometimes play a part in the researcher's contact with the research participants (Alcoff, 1991; Lather, 1991). It is not possible to be certain which of these social dimensions will have an impact, when it will do so and what the impact will be. I have reflected on this in earlier sections of this chapter through interrogating my positionings in relation to the research participants and the wider Malaysian society.

I had access to these girls in their free periods, during which they would do their own work. Ironically, the lower achieving classes had more free periods in a week than the higher achieving classes. I would always leave the option to the girls if they would want to talk to me during those free periods. Sometimes they would be busy with their schoolwork and would say no to my request. I also had access to the girls through the relief periods that I volunteered for when teachers were absent. This seemed a good opportunity to spend more time with the girls. I did not have to do any teaching but just sit in the class. For the first few weeks I would just go into the classes, sit there and talk with the girls. During these sessions, I was getting to know the girls and they were getting to know me. I developed a comfortable and friendly relationship with most of them. They shared their problems with me, asking me for advice on their boyfriends and for academic help. The girls asked me various questions including personal questions related to ethnicity and marital status. Since I am single, some of them teased me with references to the single male teachers in the school. Some also gave me advice on my dressing style.

Reinharz (1992) states that feminist research practices must be recognised as a plurality. There are various ways of doing feminist research. A variety of research

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methods were used in this research. The methods of collecting research materials used in this study included free-format essays, semi-structured one-to-one interviews, group interviews and observations in and out of the classroom. There were also the observations and informal conversations with these girls out of school. This occurred during the visits to their home for birthday parties and festive celebrations, and the social outings with the girls. I also had informal conversations with the teachers and other Form Four girls who were not involved in the project. As argued in the beginning of this chapter, feminist research while using various methods to hear and understand women's experiences acknowledges the power dynamics in the research practices from the formulation of the research aims to the collection of research materials to the interpretation and analysis of the fieldwork materials and writing of the thesis. Research methods are not neutral research tools, since the researcher creates the reality of the research situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Reinharz, 1992). Further, as in all research, the research method is influenced by the values and the personal characteristics of the researcher, including those related to, gender, ethnicity and class.

In the following sections, I discuss the various methods used in collecting research materials that inform my understandings of ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls.

4.4.2 Free-format essays **and interviews**

At the end of the first month of my fieldwork, I asked the girls participating in the research project to write a free-format essay on their experiences of being a girl. I used the individual essays as a basis for the individual semi-structured interviews.

Two months later, after I had completed my rounds of individual interviews with them on their experiences of being a girl, I asked the girls to write a free-format essay on their experiences of schooling. I used their writings as a mechanism for the individual interviews on their schooling experiences. I used issues that emerged from their writings that dealt with ethnicity in ways of being schoolgirls as prompts for the interviews. Most of the girls in writing about their experiences of being girls wrote about their familial relationships, relationships and interactions with their peers and boys, dressing styles, physical appearance, and their social lives after school hours. Some of them also wrote about their religion. In their essays on experiences of schooling, they wrote about their interactions with their peers and teachers, and the pedagogical practices of the teachers and school. They also wrote about discipline procedures in school.

Throughout the interviews, I constantly kept in mind the research aims. I was conscious of identifying links between ethnicity and schooling and the girls' perceptions of the ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian girls. I used a semi-structured interview approach as this allowed me to control my research aims yet it also allowed a reciprocal relationship to develop between me and the girls, one in which we could share and talk about daily experiences. Reinharz (1992) describes semi-structured interviews as,

> Semi-structured refers to research approach whereby the researcher plans to
> ask questions about a given topic but allows the data-gathering conversation
> itself to determine how the information is obtained (Reinhartz, 1992 p. 18).

Interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words (Reinharz, 1992).

While what the girls wrote provided me with an initial guide for the individual interviews, I also allowed them the opportunity to steer the interview to their experiences of being a girl to a certain extent. There were instances where we would have conversations on topics that were not part of the research aims. I did not use specific questions that I would address to all the girls. I began the interviews by asking the girls to explain more about what they had written in their free-format essays. The individual inteviews would last between 40 minutes (about a class period) to 80 minutes (about 2 class periods). I inteiviewed each girl on the average, about five times (an average of about six hours for each girl). Interviews were taped with the girls' permission and usually conducted in the school garden. There were no empty rooms during school hours.

I transcribed all the interview tapes myself to familiarise myself with the materials. There are also certain language nuances that only one who has lived in Malaysia over a long period would be able to pick up. I had a folder for each girl that contained her free-format essays, her transcribed interview materials, and information on her personal and family background. In the folders, I also had information that I obtained from the girls themselves on their grades for the school examinations, and the co-curricular activities in which they were involved. My own notes from my observations and informal conversations with the girls were another addition.

During the last two weeks of their school term, I conducted group interviews with these girls. I allowed them to choose their partners in these group interviews, each of which consisted of three to four girls. Their main purpose was to give the

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girls a chance to react to some of my initial analysis of the research materials, namely their essays and the individual interviews. I could not return to them the individual and group interview transcripts as time and distance did not permit me to do so. I returned to Australia immediately after my fieldwork and completed all the transcriptions of my tapes there. I did manage to do some transcribing during my fieldwork. This helped me in understanding the dynamics between the girls and myself. This also helped me to understand my role as the researcher as I became more conscious of my interview techniques and learnt through looking at the transcriptions to be more patient and give the girls more space, time and control over the remaining interview sessions.

4.43 Observations

The main purpose for the observations in and out of the school was to immerse myself as much as I could in the schooling and out of school environments of these schoolgirls. Other than the free periods, the relief classes and the interview sessions, I also sat in their classes for two months. During class, I observed and made notes of the activities of the girls in the class, their interactions with their peers and teachers and their comings and goings in and out of class. These sessions gave me an insight into the girls' experiences of schooling and provided me with background for the interview sessions as well. I was in school almost every day of their school term from early morning to late afternoon. I also had breaks with the girls sometimes in the school canteen. I also observed the girls during their involvement in the co-curricular activities. For example, I attended the Karate training sessions, the Red Crescent

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meetings, the Police Cadet marching sessions. I also attended the Teacher's Day celebration and Prize-Giving Day ceremony at the school.

I also had informal interactions and discussions with the teachers. I had breaks with the teachers in the school canteen sometimes. I was given a desk space in the teachers' staff room that I would sit at sometimes. I was mostly with the girls either in the classroom, interviewing them in the school garden, just sitting in the garden on my own or sometimes talking with other school girls who would come up to me.

Everyday, after I had finished my day at school, I would iυ»ke time to reflect and note down my immediate reactions on the happenings, be it the interviews or the informal interactions with the girls or the classroom observations in school. Thsse notes were useful to me as I was a novice in interviewing and observation research methods. With these notes, I learnt to be more patient and give the girls more time during the interview sessions. I was rather too eager for *dft.ta' in the first interviews. These notes also made be more aware of my role as the researcher and the dynamics involved between the girls and myself.

4.4.4 Electronic interviewing

Electronic interviewing is a means of gathering infoonatiou via fax, electronic mail and the Web (Fontana & Fray, 2000). Upon returning to Australia, I used the electronic mail to clarify some of the issues especially to do with ethnicity, while I was finishing the transcribing and doing my initial analysis. For example, through email, I asked one of the Indian girls the reasons for her having short hair as she knows that having long hair is important for Indian girls. In another instance, I used

the electronic mail to ask a few of the girls the difference between them and girls from other ethnic groups. Most of the girls had access to electronic mail. This research method was not the main method I used. I used the electronic mail, as I did not have the opportunity to go back to them for more interviewing and clarification due to the time and distance constraints that I have mentioned earlier.

4.4.5 Language issues

An important issue in the essays and individual and group interviews is language. I am fluent in two languages, English and the Malay language. I speak some Tamil but I am not fluent in the Tamil language. I went through an education system where there was a transition from using English to Malay as a medium of instruction in the schooling and university system. The Mathematics and Science subjects were taught in English and the Humanities subjects were taught in the Malay language. I did two English language subjects, one was based on the Malaysian curriculum and the other was the British O-levels English language. The medium of instruction in all Malaysian secondary schools today is Malay. All of these girls are fluent in the Malay language. Most of the girls from the highest achieving class, Science A are very fluent in English. I allowed the girls to choose the languages they wanted to use in their essays and interviews. The girls from Science A used English. The girls from the other classes used either a mix of English and Malay, English or Malay. There were no problems in communicating with the girls except with the three Indian girls in Arts C. This was the only instance where I felt that language was a hindrance to communication. They were fluent in the Tamil language and used Tamil in most of their conversations. They were not as fluent in English and Malay. I was not fluent

in the Tamil language. These three Indian girls asked me whether I was Indian and whether I spoke the Tamil language. The interviews with these three Indian girls were conducted in the Malay language. My interview sessions with these three Indian girls were shorter than those with the other girls involved in this study. Most of the times, these girls said that my questions were 'difficult'. One of the girls said that 'if I had to answer your questions, it would take one day to think about it'. My lack of fluency in the Tamil language had repercussions with this group of three Indian girls from the lowest achieving class.

4.5 Working with the research materials

My research materials comprised the free-format essays on experiences of being a girl and schooling, the transcripts from the semi-structured individual interviews and group interviews as well as my observation notes and the electronic communication.

Reay (1996a) states that interpretation remains an imperfect and incomplete process. There are many possible readings of interview transcripts and other research materials. Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) state

> We cannot read meaning *in* interview texts, allowing them to propose their own meanings, without also reading meaning *into* them, as we make sense of their meanings (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994 p. 133).

Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) further assert that interpretation is a political, contested and unstable process between the lives of the researchers and those of the research participants.

The manner in which I went about analysing and interpreting my research materials is just one way of reading these materials. It is very much influenced by own values and positionings and experiences as a Malaysian-Indian-Christian female

educator. I have addressed these issues earlier on in this chapter as well as in Chapter One.

The first round of analysis entailed reading through the research materials for each of the ethnic groups. As ethnicity is an important social dimension in the research as well as a salient factor in being Malaysian, I grouped the materials according to the ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians and immersed myself in the materials.

The next round of analysis entailed clustering the girls within the ethnic groups into two groups, academically successful and academically unsuccessful girls. Academic ranking is an important aspect of being Malaysian schoolgirls. I choose to use the term, academically successful to refer to these schoolgirls' illustrations of a girl who gets high grades and is ranked highly in the form. I also choose this term to refer to the girls in the top class, 4 Science A which is a Science stream class. Most of the girls in 4 Science A are academically successful as they are ranked between 1 and 77 out of a total of 200 girls in the form. There are some exceptions to this, as any system that attempts to classify in this way has contradictions. However, this is the broad classification. For example, the girls in 4 Science A who were academically ranked 41 and 42 out of a total of 42 in the class were also ranked as 111 and 118 respectively out of the total of 200 in the form. I will discuss these girls under a separate section on exceptions to the patterning within each chapter. The term academically unsuccessful refers to schoolgirls who get low grades and are academically ranked low in the form. This also refers to the girls from the low achieving classes, 4 Arts B and Arts C that are Arts stream classes. These two classes

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are ranked as the lower achieving classes in Form Four, The girls from Arts B and Arts C who were involved in this study were ranked between 104 and 185 out of the total 200 girls in the form. There is one exception to this. The top girl in 4 Arts B who is part of the research project was ranked academically 46 out of 200 in the form. I will highlight these exceptions in the chapter on Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls.

I then looked for patternings within these groups of academically successful and academically unsuccessful groups within all of the ethnic groups.

Two terms emerged as significant from the individual and group interviews - the 'Western' girl and the 'traditional' girl. These girls used the term 'traditional girl' to describe their conceptions of the Malay, Chinese or Indian girl. For example, the 'traditional' Indian girl is one who has long hair, wears the pottu on her forehead, is obedient to her parents, has no boyfriend, does not wear revealing clothes and keeps to Indian traditions and customs.

Some of the girls from the three ethnic groups and three classes used the term 'Western' in the phrases 'Western way', 'Western culture', 'Western society' and 'Western style' in reference to moral issues, sexuality and open-mindedness (such as wearing revealing clothes, social interaction with boys, being able to talk about sex). They also use it in reference to fluency in the English language and watching and reading Western media material. I chose to encapsulate these under the term 'Western'.

The Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls' representations of self are presented along a continuum of 'Western'~'traditonal' girl. This notion of 'Western'

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and 'traditional' comes from these girls' words. I do not suggest a segregated dichotomy of Western/traditional girl, nor do I-wish to privilege one over the other. Th"'** girls were not totally 'Western', nor were they totally 'traditional'. This does not discount other identities within being a Malay, Chinese and Indian girl. However, these are the identities that they have represented to me in their free-format essays, and individual and group interviews. I suggest that the girls move along the continuum of 'Western'~'traditional'. They thus could be more 'Western' than 'traditional' or more 'traditional' than 'Western' or find themselves balancing between 'Western' and 'traditional'.

Based on this Western~traditional continuum and the descriptions the girls used for these terms, I clustered the girls within the academic groups along this continuum. I also looked for similarities and differences in the themes that emerged within and between the clusters of girls. In doing so, the differences and similarities in the patterning among ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian girls and educational outcomes emerged. I also link this patterning to their school behaviour. By school behaviour, I mean their behaviour in relation to the teachers and their peers, and the school rules. I use the term Conforming behaviour to refer to adhering to school rules, being polite and respectful to teachers, completing homework, and being quiet and attentive in class. Rebellious behaviour refers to breaking school rules and collecting demerit points, being lazy, being rude to teachers, and being noisy in disrupting the class.

I looked for elements of discourses, which elaborated ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian girls. For example, the Chinese girls described 'Chineseness' as being selfish, materialistic and always wanting to win through the notion of kiasu.

This thesis examines differences in ways of being schoolgirls within and between the ethnic categories of Malays, Chinese and Indians. I also look at the patternings in these differences. I also examine the discourses the girls negotiate in constructing their self-identifications. I acknowledge to some extent that in clustering the girls I am sublimating some differences. There is some homogenising when a group is labeled. However, the main issue in homogenising in this study is actually pre-determined by the school structure through the academic streaming and ranking, and the state's ethnic labeling of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Others.

I use the notion of resistance as posited by Giroux (1983) to understand these schoolgirls' responses to their social world, namely the discourses they negotiate in ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. As discussed in the previous three chapters, ways of being and knowing as women/girls in Malaysia entail processes of negotiation and contestation with the state's discourses on politics of ethnic identification that permeate all social institutions, the discourses of gender and ethnicity of the various ethnic collectivities, and the daily experiences of being within specific contexts. The notion of resistance is used as an analytical tool to examine the patternings between the ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls, educational outcomes and the discourses the schoolgirls negotiate in constructing their self-identifications. The locus of oppression is brought to light in unpacking this link between the macro and micro ways of being and knowing schoolgirls.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I reiterated the notion that experience is a source of knowledge (Brah, 1996; Lather, 1991; Mohanty, 1992; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 1999; Scott, 1992), which was discussed in Chapter One. I also conceptualised the notion of speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991; Mohanty, 1991; Narayan, 1997; Spivak, 1988,1993) through the interrogation of my own positionings in this research. I drew on the notion of strategic essentialism as posited by Spivak (1990, 1993) for this purpose. I also discussed the power dynamics in my relationship with the research participants, the 16 year-old schoolgirls. I described the manner in which I went about doing my seven months of fieldwork in an urban girls' secondary school in the state of Penang in Malaysia. I also described how I dealt with my research materials and why I made these choices.

This is not an objective study and I provide instances where my own positionings affected my fieldwork and in the reading of the research materials. I have aimed to be as reflexive as possible in this thesis by bringing to light my background, values and interests and considering how these have affected the research process.

In the following chapter, I provide a description of the research site and research participants.

Chapter Five

The school and the schoolgirls

5.1 Introduction

My fieldwork was conducted over a period of seven months in the year 2000 in an urban girls school, Parkview Girls Secondary School in the state of Penang. I use the acronym PGSS from here onwards. This school is located on the island of Penang.

In this chapter, I first briefly describe the state of Penang to set the context of my research. Next I provide some background on the school in which my research was located regarding the ethnic composition of the student and teacher population. The pedagogical practices of the school, namely the streaming system, the academic rankings in the classes and form, and the school's performance in the major national exams are also described. This provides a window to the academic culture of the school. I draw on the comments that the girls made in the individual interviews and their essays on the schooling system in general, the streaming practices and tuition classes. Profiles of the classes in which the research participants studied, 4 Science A, 4 Arts B and 4 Arts C are provided through the descriptions of the girls. Their descriptions come from their free-format essays and individual interviews. Following this, I provide personal, familial and academic details of the schoolgirls involved in this project. I also use tables to illustrate these details. The information on their personal and academic background was obtained in the one-to-one interviews I had with them.

5.2 The research site

5.2.1 State of Penang

Penang is the third most urbanized, and second most industrialized state in Malaysia (Shariff, 2000). The state comprises the island and part of the mainland of Peninsular Malaysia known as Seberang Perai. The 2000 census showed a population of about 1.31 million for the ste«.e of Penang with half a million on the island and another half million on the mainland portion of the state. In terms of ethnic composition, 42.5% are *Bumiputeras*, 46.5 % are Chinese, 10.6 % Indians and 0.4% Others (Malaysia, 2000). The distribution of religions among the population of the state of Penang consists of, 44.2% Islam, 33.7% Buddhism, 8.8% Confucianism/Taoism/other traditional Chinese religions, 8.7% Hinduism, 3.6% Christianity, 0.3% tribal/folk religion, 0.4% other religion and 0.4% no religion. As noted in Chapter Two, the 2000 census shows that the national demography has an ethnic composition of 67.3 % *Bumiputeras*, 24.5 % Chinese, with Indians at 7.2%, and Others at 1.2%. In terms of the distribution of religions among the Malaysian population, 60.4% profess Islam, 19.2% Buddhism, 9.1% Christianity, 6.3% Hinduism and 2.6% Confucianism/Taoism/other traditional Chinese religions (Malaysia, 2002).

These demographic statistics indicate that there is no definite ethnic majority in the state of Penang. The Malays and the Chinese are almost equal in terms of numerical strength. This is also reflected in this school's ethnic composition among the students. Educational, economic and social policies in Penang as in most of the other Malaysian states are centralized and controlled by the Malay-dominated Government machineries. The Chief Minister of the state of Penang is a Chinese, the

only Chinese Chief Minister of a Malaysian state. Half of the Penang state executive committee is Chinese. These Chinese politicians belong to a CM"ᵗ≻e*"'ased political party that is part of the Malay-dominated Government coalition. Penang, bei% one of the most industrialised Malaysian states, hosts a significant number of multinational companies (for example Sony, Hewlett Packard, Intel, Motorola). The Chinese doniJnate.the top and middle ranks of management in these international companies. As noted in Chapter Two, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two ethnic groups, the Chinese and the Malays, one in which the social, political and economic needs of these two ethnic collectivities are met in important ways through the government and corporate sector.

The almost equal numerical numbers of Malays and Chinese in the state has *an* impact on the daily living experiences in the various social institutions in the state. State-government departments tend to be Malay dominated but a significant number of political bodies and corporate sectors are Chinese dominated. With the schools in Penang, some have a majority of Malay students and some a majority of Chinese students. The ethnic *mbi* of student and teacher populations in each school differs. The school in which I was located has a balance of Malay and Chinese schoolgirls and a majority of Chinese teachers. How would this specific ethnic mix of the school impact on the schoolgirls' self-identifications? What would the etlinic politics be among the schoolgirls in the context of the national level of ethnic politics?

5.2.2 Schools in Penang

There is a total of 82 schools in the state of Penang, with 41 of these schools located on the island of Penang and the other 41 located on the mainland portion of the State. Out of the 41 schools on the island, 12 (26.8%) are girls' school, 5 boys (12.2%) and 24 (58.5%) co-educational schools.

Most of the single-sex schools in contemporary Malaysia were managed by the Christians, namely the Catholic missionary groups, during the British colonial period. There were still remnants of missionary education during the initial periods after Malaysia gained independence in 1957. Upon gaining independence, the Malaysian government put into effect various education acts and implemented curriculum reforms to develop a Malaysian-oriented education and schooling system. As noted in Chapter Two, the schooling and education system is under the jurisdiction of the state-controlled Ministry of Education.

5.3 The ethnic demography of the school - students and teachers

PGSS was fourded in 1961 with 13 teachers and 377 students. It was originally a Convent school. There are two school sessions; the morning session caters for Forms 3, 4 and 5 and runs from 7.40am to 1.30pm and the afternoon session caters for Forms 1 and 2 and runs from 1.30pm to 6.30pm. The ethnic composition of the student population reflects the state of Penang's ethnic demography. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 provide the ethnic composition of the students and teachers in this school. The total student enrolment as of July 2000 was 1024 students vith 38.9 % *Bumiputeras,* 42.9% Chinese, 15.5 % Indians and 2.6% others. Most of the *Bumiputeras* are

Malays.   In this way, the *non-Bumiputera* ethnic group constitutes the majority. However, the number of Malay and Chinese girls do not differ significantly. The majority of the schoolteachers are Chinese.

The school principal is a Malay woman. Most schools in Malaysia have a Malay principal.   This is connected to the affirmative action policy where top positions in the government sector are mainly held by the Bumiputeras, namely the Malays.   As argued in Chapter Two, there is a definite Malayness within the government machineries in Malaysia.   However, in the case of Parkview Girls Secondary School, this expression of the affirmative action policy in the school principal being a Malay had a minimal impact on the Chineseness of the school ethos. I asked the schoolteachers in my informal discussions with them whether the school principal being a Malay woman affected the schooling practices. Some of the Chinese teachers said in these informal discussions that the school principal does not interfere with the teachers' pedagogical practices as long as the school maintains its academic standing in the public examinations and wins prizes in the district and state level competitions (for example in the sporting activities, choir, choral competitions).

Table 5.1: The ethnic composition of the student population in the school

Forms	*Bumiputeras*	Chinese	Indians	Others	Total
1	72 (36.3%)	79 (40.3%)	40 (20.4%)	5 (2.55%)	196
2	92 (42.9%)	79 (36.9%)	38 (17.8%)	5 (2.33%)	214
3	91 (41.5%)	99 (45.2%)	26(11.8%)	3 (1.36%)	219
4	72 (36.2%)	87 (43.7%)	33 (16.6%)	7 (3.5%)	199
5	71 (36.4%)	95 (48.7%)	22(11.3%)	7 (3.6%)	195
Total	398 (38.9%)	439 (42.9%)	159 (15.5%)	27 (2.6%)	1023

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Table 5.2: The ethnic composition of the teacher population in the school

Ethnicity of teachers	Morning session (forms 3,4 and 5)	Afternoon session (forms 1 and 2\	Total
Chinese	25 r73.5%l	13 [72.2%]	38 [73.1%]
Malays	8 r23.5%l	3 [1.7%]	11 r21.2%l
Indians	1 [2.9%]	2 n.1%l	3 [5.8%]
Total	34	18	52

Table 5.3 provides the school's performance in the major national examination, Malaysian Certificate of Education (or in Malay, *SPM)* that students sit for at the end of Form Five, the end of the secondary schooling. The results indicate that this school has an above average academic performance. Grades are calculated on the basis of points gained through the scores of each subject, hi terms of academic ranking, Grade 1 is better than Grade 2 and Grade 2 is higher than Grade 3. Students who receive Grades 1 and a high Grade 2 will enter the public or private higher educational institutions. Those with lower Grade 2s, Grade 3 s and those who fail will either go into the work force or repeat this exam.

Table 5.3: The Malaysian Certificate of Education *(SPM)* results from 1997 to 1999

Year	Grade	Number of candidates	Percentages
1997	1	118	61.97
	2	37	19.27
	3	17	8.85
	Fail	20	9.91
1998	1	123	64.74
	2	39	20.53
	3	15	7.89
	Fail	13	6.84
1999	1	111	58.42
	2	51	26.84
	3	16	8.42
	Fail	12	6.32

Tablo 5.4 shows the ethnic breakdown of the top achievers in this major public exam and indicates the ethnic patterning of the top girls in this school. Students can sit for a maximum of 10 subjects in the *SPM* exam. Most students sit for 9 subjects. The figures below clearly show that the Chinese girls are the top achievers in this school.

Table 5.4: The ethnic breakdown of the top achievers in the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination, 1997 to 1999

Year	Number of As	Number of Chinese gills	Number of Malay girls	Number of Indian girls
1999	lOAs	2	-	-
	9As	7	-	-
	8As	3	-	1
	7As	7	2	i
1998	lOAs	1	-	1
	9As	10	1	-
	8As	10	-	-
	7As	4	2	1
1997	lOAs	1	-	.
	9As	2	2	1
	8As	8	-	-
	7As	3	1	-

The ethnic composition v/ithin the school and its relationship with the national level politics of ethnic identification impinges on students' self-identifications and iiow they see each otiicr. This school has a sense of 'Chineseness' in that most of the top academic achievers, school prefects and teachers in the school are Chinese. There is an interplay among the 'Chineseness' of this school, ths macro level politics of ethnic identification that favours the ethnic Malay majority and the ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls are enacted in this school. The interpretation of the centralized education system and the politics of ethnic identification are contextual and site-specific. As discussed in Chapters One and Three, we do not construct our self-identifications in isolation. Ways of being and knowing are multiple and shifting in response to context. Ways of being and knowing shift within the discursive spaces

to which one has access and are mediated by one's social context. Processes of self-identification include relationships between self and others. Griffiths (1995) states that we define ourselves in relation to how we believe others position us. This will be explored in the following chapters.

5.4 The Form Four classes

As noted in Chapter Two, the education and schooling system is highly centralised and all major decision and policy making take place at the Ministry of Education. In this school, as in most Malaysian schools, the curriculum, the major public examinations, and the co-curricular activities follow a prescribed formula determined by the Ministry of Education. Text books used in schools are determined by the Ministry of Education. The teachers have some form of flexibility and creativity, though they are restricted on the delivery of their teaching material. They have to complete the syllabus for purposes of the national examinations. Teachers in schools also have some flexibility in the school's internal examinations. However, these academic assessments do not differ much from the national public examinations.

In the following sections, I describe aspects of Form Four and the school, namely the Form Four curriculum, the classes, streaming and academic ranking, tuition classes and school uniform. This detail is necessary in order to understand the discourses of schooling the girls are located within.

5.4.1 Curriculum **and** pedagogical practices **of Form Four**

All Form Four students will have sat for a common public exam, Lower Secondary Assessment the previous year. The subjects they took in this exam were categorised as Core subjects (Malay language, English language, Mathematics, Islamic Religious

Studies/Moral Education, Science, Geography, History, Living Skills, Art Education, Physical and Health Education) and Additional subjects (Chinese language, Tamil language, Arabic language). The format of this examination is one of multiple-choice questions except for the language papers that also have essay format questions. This national examination determines the stream and the choice of subjects the students take in Form Four. The schooling system is explained in detail in Appendix B.

It is at this siage in Form Four that students begin to specialise in either the arts, science, technical, vocational or religious disciplines. At this school, as in most secondary schools in Malaysia, students who obtain high grades in Maths and Science in the Lower Secondary Assessment examination will go into the Science stream. The grades obtained in this examination determine whether they take the Pure Science subjects, the Accounting combination or the Commerce combination. As Form Five students, they will sit for another public examination, the Malaysian Certificate of Education *(SPM)* that is equivalent to the British O-levels. In addition to this academic aspect of the curriculum, there are also the various co-curricular activities comprising 'uniform bodies' (Red Crescent, Police Cadets, Guides), clubs, societies and sports in which these girls become involved. In this school, the girls are required to participate in one uniform body, one club and one sports activity. These co-curricular activities are organised to develop character, discipline and leadership (Ministry of Education, 1997), School Librarians, School Prefects and Canteen Prefects are positions that are normally nominated by both the students and teachers. Examples of some of these clubs and societies are Career and Guidance Club, Young

Enterprisers, School Beautification Squad, Islamic Society and Police Cadets. Most secondary schools in Malaysia have similar co-curricular societies and activities.

The schoolgirls in this school, as in most Malaysian secondary schools, have four examinations each year, two mid-semester exams, a mid-year examination and an end of the year examination. The girls are academically ranked in their class and in the whole form for the mid-year and end of the year examination. For example, a student would have in her academic record the following figures: position in class 25/42, position in form 28/200. This means that in her class she has been academically ranked as 25 out of a total 42 girls in the class. In her form, she is academically ranked as 28 out of a total 200 girls in Form Four. The form ranking includes both the Science and Arts stream even though the combination of subjects differs for these two streams. This academic ranking is based on points that are accorded to the grades of these girls in the school subjects. A report is issued at the end of the exams and requires the signature of the parents. This report has details on the grades for each subject, a student's academic ranking in the class and overall form and their involvement in co-curricular activities. The class teacher prepares this school report with input from all the teachers who teach the class as well as the discipline and co-curricular activities teacher. In addition, the girls also receive grades (for example A, B, C) for overall behaviour and participation in co-curricular activities. Most of the girls told me during the individual and group interviews that the grade for behaviour is dependent on school attendance rates, discipline and general behaviour in relation to the teachers and students. This school adopts the demerit system where points are given to girls who break the school rules. These

demerit points contribute significantly to the grade for behaviour. The grade for co-curricular activities is dependent on their attendance, leadership positions and level of participation in these activities. There is also the Prize-Giving Day at the end of the year where the top achievers for the subjects and forms are presented certificates of excellence. This is an annual school event that involves all the teachers, students, parents of the achievers and members of the Parent-Teacher Association. Students who excel in sports are also given certificates of excellence at this ceremony.

The girls are not only evaluated academically as well as in co-curricular activities but also in terms of their behaviour within the school environment.

There is a class monitor and assistant class monitor for each class. They play the role of the teacher's assistant in passing relevant information about the procedures in the school to their peers, maintaining the teaching materials (like duster and chalks), ensuring that the girls on the duty roster do their cleaning duties (of the class and blackboard), recording the daily attendance of the students and other minor administrative duties.

5.4.2 Classes - 4 Science A, 4 Arts B and 4 Arts C

The girls in Form Four are streamed into Science and Arts streams based on the results they obtained in the previous year's national exam, the Lower Secondary Assessment (or in Malay, *PMR)*. The Malaysian education policy recommends that students themselves choose the stream and combination of subjects they want to pursue for their upper secondary studies for Form Four and Form Five. However, due to a lack of specialist teachers and physical facilities (classrooms and laboratories), students do not have ths option to choose their subjects. When the Integrated

Secondary School Curriculum was implemented in the 1990s, students were supposed to have a more liberal choice of elective subjects. However, many schools still force students into the selection of subjects that conform to the traditional science and arts stream packages (Loo, 2000). The process of determining the streams the girls enter is based on the grades the girls obtained in the Lower Secondary Assessment, namely in the Science and Mathematics subjects. The teachers in most schools also have a major role in deciding which stream and subject combination the girls take. Those girls going into the Science stream would be expected to have good grades in the Mathematics and Science subjects. Students intending to do the subject Accounting in the Arts stream would be expected to have high grades for Mathematics. There is & privileging of the Science stream over the Arts stream in the Malaysian education system. Within the Arts stream, there is a privileging of the Accounting over the Commerce combination. The table below shows the subject combinations for the Science and Arts streams as well as within the Arts Stream.

Table 5.5: Subject combinations in the Science and Arts streams

Streams	Science stream classes			Arts stream classes		
Form Four classes	4 Science A	4 Science B	4 Science C	4ArtsA	4Arts2	4 Arts C
Subjects taken by students specific to the streams	Additional Matherrlatics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology			Additional Mathematics, Science, Principal Accounts, Basic Economics	Science, Principal Accounts, Basic Economics	Science, Principle Accounts, Commerce
Common subjects taken by all students in both streams	Malay language, English language, History, Mathematics, Moral Studies (for nonMuslirris), Islamic Religious knowledge (for Muslirris)					

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4 Science A (4S/A), 4 Science B (4S/B) and 4 Science C (4S/C) are the Science Stream classes. 4 Science A is ranked as the best class in Form Four academically as all students achieved the maximum 7As from the previous public exam. 4 Arts A (4A/A), Arts B (4A/B) and Arts C (4A/C) are Arts stream classes with 4 Arts A being the best ranked class academically.

52 girls in this Form Four obtained the maximum 7As in the Lower Secondary Assessment last year. However, only 42 of them could be placed in Science A due to lack of physical space in the classes. Furthermore, this was the maximum number of students the teachers could manage in a class. The school authorities, the students and the parents of these high achievers who could not get into Science A agreed that there would be academic ranking again at the end of Form Four based on the final examination. This would give those in Science B an opportunity to come up to Science A in Form Five. At the end of the year, the last three girls in Science A went down to 5 Science B and the top three girls in Science B came up to 5 Science A.

There is an ethnic patterning in terms of the student distribution iii the Arts and Science streams and within each of these streams. The table below shows that the Chinese girls are concentrated more in the Science stream classes and the top Arts stream class. The Malays are concentrated more in the Arts Stream classes. The Indians are concentrated more in the average Science and Arts stream classes.

Table 5.6: Ethnic composition of Form Four girls according to Science and Arts streams

Class	*Bumiputeras*	Chinese	Indians	Others	Total
4Scien?eA	7 [22.5%]	31 [73.8%]	3 [7.14%]	1 [2.4%]	42
4ScienceB	8 [20%]	19 [47.5%]	10 [40%]	3 [7.5%]	40
4ScienceC	4 [23.5%]	8 [47.1%]	4 [23.5%]	1 [5.88%]	17
4ArtsA	14 [35%]	23 [57.5%]	2 [5%]	1 [2.5%]	40
4ArtsB	15 [48.4%]	4 [12.9%]	11 [35.5%]	1 [3.22%]	31
4ArtsC	24 [82.8%]	2 [6.8%]	3 [10.3%]	0	29

The following table shows the distribution of my research participants.

Table 5.7: Distribution of research participants

Classes/ethnic groups	*Bumiputeras*	Chinese	Indians	Total
4 Science A	5	8	2	15
4 Arts B	1	2	4	7
4 Arts C	9	-	3	12
Total	15 (42.9%)	10 (28.6%)	9 (25.7%)	34

5.4.3 The girls' views on schooling and streaming

In this section, I provide the girls' views of the schooling system. This is based on the individual and group interviews, and essays on experiences of schooling. Most of the girls commented on the overemphasis on examination in the schooling system. This is illustrated in the following comments:

> So much emphasis on exams...like if you are very good in memorizing.. .very good lah (Aniza of 4 Science A).

> We somehow find school too stressing because of the amount of homeworks we are given and the amount of after-school-activities our parents make us involved in (ie tuition classes, piano lessons) which is good in a way but sometimes the competition in school really kills (Hazreen of 4 Science A in her essay).

Some of the girls felt that there was no room in the present education system for the students to be creative and expressive. Students tend to be homogenised into a group. The following excerpts from the individual interviews illustrate this.

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> The way that the teachers want...which is boring...no view...just follow the leader and toe the line...this does not give you the chance to be individuals.. .to be more like a whole clump of students.. .we are all one class (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

> Most students study because they are forced to...because they have to take the exam and because they want to pass the exam with flying colours...very little or none of the students actually study for the love and fun of it or to gain more knowledge...instead when the students are studying their mind only thinks about exam exams exams. ..even though exams are good in a way but it is also making most students become *kiasu* people (Ai Choo of 4 Science A).

Most of the girls in this research said during the individual and group interviews that schooling has two main purposes, firstly to gain academic knowledge and gain a certificate to get into a career. Secondly, there is the social knowledge gained through sharing and interacting with school friends. They also learnt to be independent and communicate in school. Most of the girls said that the learning and teaching process tended to be unidirectional, from teacher to student. However, in spite of this, most of the top students saw the necessity of doing well academically to secure a brighter future.

> For your future...to be a better person...like you won't suffer...live a poor life...they teach you so much...study...study...like you will achieve so much. ..and to be more confident by mixing around (Shanti of 4 Arts B).

> Schooling prepares us...getting good results so that you can get into univ and it helps you socialize..friends...and schooling in a way helps you know what you are interested in (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

> Preparing for the future...so you have a bright future...you won't be a road sweeper...you will be bright and intelligent and earn money...and you can have a family...you won't have a dull future...dull as in...more educated...so people won't cheat you and you will have money and whatever you want (Nalini of 4 Science A).

Most of the girls in Arts B said in the interviews that schooling is relevant for their future. They also complained of difficulties in undei-standing subjects in school like Maths or Accounts.

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> Difficult...everything is of subjective format...many essays...Maths is difficult...too many topics...and the concepts are difficult...I only understand very little of what the teacher teaches...and if I ask the teacher., .the more I don't understand (Rathi of 4 Arts C).

Most of the girls in all the three classes said during the individual interviews that in general most of the teachers in the school did not care for the students. The following comments illustrate this point:

> Ask the teachers to pay attention individually., .sometimes the teachers won't check the homework.. .they don't care (Revathi of 4 Arts B).

> Some teachers...they teach you...they just teach...teach...teach and go out.. .they don't care about you (Yi Mei of Arts B).

> There is always a barrier there...like oh...our job is to teach the students...that is it...once you have finished with them (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

> The thing is that they have to train teachers well...cause like some teachers are qualified in certificates but attitudes...can see lah...they are not understanding...you can see how they pick on some girls...not that nice (Yoke Lin of 4 Science A).

There are mixed views among this group of girls on the pedagogical practices of streaming and academic ranking. Most of the girls in this research said in the individual interviews that there was a privileging of the Science stream over the Arts stream. One of the girls expressed this in the following way that summarised the attitudes of most of the girls on this point:

> There is discrimination against Arts students (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

Most of the girls of the top class, Science A felt that the streaming allows for a match between learning abilities and teaching pace. Su Mei's views in the individual interview exemplify this point:

> If you don't stream us...then how is the class going to work...the teachers will be teaching.. .the girls that are weak won't understand anything.. .those who are fast will be utterly bored (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

Some of the girls felt that having a class of mixed abilities assisted the weaker students in improving their academic abilities. The following comments by these two girls in the individual interview illustrate this point:

> Mixing the good ones with the not so good ones is better.. .then make the not so good ones the good ones (Roslina of 4 Science A).

> hi a way...together all the best in one class, it is good...but if you gather all the not so good ones in one class.. .they don't have the feeling to work harder I supposc.to be the best...cause there is no one the best in that class... so everyone is equal or as bad as the others...so they don't have someone to challenge them...so they will just keep on being like that for ever (Nabila of 4 Science A).

There are also girls from all the classes who felt that streaming is detrimental to one's self-worth. They felt that streaming differentiated between academically successful and academically unsuccessful students. Some of their comments included:

> The inferiority complex might build in you...especially when you are in a not-so-good class...and then some people who go to the first class...wow...I am so great...they have this gap kind of thing...and some people will think.. .why am I so dumb.. .1 am in this class.. .that kind of thing (Hazreen of 4 Science A).

> Actually schooling is fun...if you stay at home....there is nothing much to do...but they like to differentiate between the smart and not so smart students...I prefer primary school...the learning was fun...happy...here in secondary...the teachers like to compare (Suraya of 4 Arts C).

> That is separating you for who you are...it is discrimination of stupidity...you are judging people.. .oh you are not in Science A.. .so you are stupid (Su Lin of 4 Science A).

Most of the girls in Arts B and Arts C felt that the difference between the Arts and Science stream lay in the combination of the subjects and not in the academic abilities of the students. This point is illustrated in the following 'comments:

> I don't agree Science A is a clever class...other classes are clever also...but they do not want to choose that subject...some of them do not want to choose that subject...you know different (Bhavani of 4 Arts B).

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> Make other classes feel stupid...you feel ashamed to go to one
> class...like some classes...people don't understand....like Arts 1 means
> these subjects...Arts B does these subjects...they think...oh Arts C is a
> stupid class (Sharmala of 4 Arts B).

Suraya of Arts C disagreed with the practice of academic ranking in the form as the subject combination was different for each stream.

> We are not taking the same subjects...like the Science classes...I do not
> understand how they can calculate the form position for all of us in Form Four
> as the subjects we take are not the same...how can they calculate this as we are
> not studying the same subjects (Suraya of 4 Arts C).

Most of the girls involved in this research project felt that school is boring with an over-emphasis on examinations and homework. They enjoyed coming to school for the school interaction with friends. Most of these girls also wanted the teachers to treat them with more respect and care for them more other than just fulfilling their role to impart information and knowledge during the teaching.

There were mixed views on the pedagogical practices of streaming, with most of the 4 Science A girls advocating streaming and most of the Arts B and Arts C girls seeing it as a biased and unfair way of categorising the students. In general, there was an agreement among most of the girls that there is a privileging of the Science stream over the Arts stream.

5.4.4 Tuition culture

There is a very strong tuition culture among the girls in this school. Tuition classes are classes these students go to after school hours either at a tuition center or in the private homes of the tutors. They have to pay for this classes and the tutors are usually experienced schoolteachers. Most of the students in the high achieving classes were taking tuition classes in the year of the study. Those girls from the lower achieving classes said that they v/ould do so in the next year. These tuition classes

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prepare the students for the coming public examination. The tutors are very familiar with the kind of questions that are likely to come out for the examination. The students are taught the important aspects of the examination and given many past year examination questions and other related exercises to complete. Tuition teachers have experience with the secondary school system and have studied the patterns of the examination questions over the years. Because of this, they have acquired keen skills in being able to predict topics that are likely to be included in the SPM public examination. Some of these teachers would also have had experiences in being examiners and grading subjects for these examinations.

Most of the girls in the highest achieving class in the one to one interviews commented on the necessity of tuition classes to achieve high grades in the examinations. They also felt that the tuition classes provided them with opportunities to clarify some of their lack of understanding during the school periods. Most of them also said during the one to one interviews that the tuition classes provided them with a wider range of exercises. The following comments are illustrative of these points:

> Tuition...normal lah...I think I must go...I cannot understand what the teacher is teaching...they go quite fast...not comfortable to ask the teachers in school. (Roslinaof4 Science A).

> Tuition serves the same purpose of teaching us what we need to know to do well in the SPM there are some stuff these teachers don't teach...don't give exam papers according to syllabus...they tend to branch out a bit...so sometimes the tuition teachers also know what the teachers do...so we learn extra stuff...and also it is sort of a practice and a disciplined time for us to study which we don't do. (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

Most of the girls in the low achieving classes, 4 Arts B and 4 Arts C told me in the individual interviews that they would attend tuition classes in Form Five.

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5.4.5 School uniform

All Malaysian secondary schools have a standard school uniform as determined by the Ministry of Education. For girls, there is the blue pinafore with a white short sleeved blouse inside. Most non-Malay girls wore this style of school uniform. The Malay and Muslim schoolgirls in Malaysia wear the *baju kurung* to school - the top is a long, long-sleeved white tunic and the skirt is blue. A few of the non-Malay girls wear the *baju kurung* on some school days. Likewise there are some but very few Malay girls who wear the pinafore. Some of the Muslim girls also wear the *tudung* or headscarf. This is a Malay term for veiling and there are various styles in Malaysia. The Muslim girls in the school are only allowed to wear the white *tudung* that complements the school uniform of blue and white. In this group of 15 Malay girls in the research project, five wore the *tudung*. Almost all the Malay girls wore the *baju kurung*. Two Malay girls wore the pinafore to school on some days. School prefects have a different uniform, a navy blue skirt with a white blouse and a tie. There is differentiation in terms of school uniforms, there is a distinction between Malays and non-Malays, Muslims and non-Muslims, and students and the prefects.

5.5 Profiles of the classes - the girls' voices and my voice

In this section, I provide a profile of the three classes, 4 Science A, 4 Arts B and 4 Arts C. These are the classes involved in my project. I draw on my own observations and school records. I also use the girls' descriptions of their own classes and those of their peers in the individual and group interviews, and my informal discussions with the teachers. This provides an insight as to how these girls see themselves in being part of these classes.

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5.5.1   4 Science A

The girls in this class describe 4 Science A, the top class within the top stream, Science stream, as a class with a big gap between the high and the low achieving girls. This is illustrated in the following comment during the individual interviews:

> There is a big gap between those who get above SO marks and those who get 50 something...so those who get 50 something...the teacher has to teach them a lot.. .and for the rest of us.. .1 don't know about the rest of them.. .but I find it boring in class when the teachers explains like Physics and all that...I already know what she is explaining...so I find it boring (Aniza of 4 Science A).

Most of the girls within this class commented that their teachers perceived them to be selfish, disrespectful, snobbish, over-confident and insolent. Some of the teachers who teach this class also made comments during my informal discussions with them that the students in this class were over-confident and answered back to teachers. The following student comments made during one-to-one interview illustrates this:

> From 4 Science A we will go to 5 Science A...so by the time we are 2 years in that class..,the teachers say that we come big-headed...we think we are smart and don't follow rules...fxtually when we first came into this class 4 Science A...we weren't like that...but the teachers come into the class...and say...4 Science A, you don't expect to be like that...every teacher who comes in says that...so we purposely do things to irritate them (Su Mei of 4 Science 1).

> I hate it when teachers go everyday...oh you are Science A...you should know that...so clever class...and the next day they go...just because you are 4 Science A you think you are so smart (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

> My classmates are very selfish, disrespectful of teachers...they choose teachers to respect., .the teachers say our class has a bad reputation...we have rude manners...one teacher said the class only wants manes and not education.. .even one mark counts (Roslina of 4 Science A).

Within the class, the top achievers were described as being self-centered, egotistical and very competitive by their classmates. The following comments from the individual interviews are illustrative of this:

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> I don't understand why they have to be like that...okay fine...you are smart.. .you don't have to go around showing off.. .and sometimes she is rude also...I mean she thinks she is so smart...most of them are in my class (Hazreen of 4 Science A).

> 4 Science A, I personally think that this class is very self-centered except a few of my friends (Su Lin of 4 Science A).

> We have so much competition...the Arts C.they don't have to worry at all...like for me I have to worry...cause I know that I can go down some more.. .but they don't have to worry (Priya of 4 Science A).

> Sometimes when your results are not up to the class standard...there are some people who will look down on you...some people will start avoiding you and you feel like the black sheep of the class...this has happened to a few of my friends...I can see some students in my class behave like that.. .isn't it cruel (Yoke Lin of 4 Science A).

These girls saw the top achievers as having a good balance between their studies and enjoying life. The girls in this class saw themselves as being proficient in English in comparison to girls from other classes. Some of the girls also commented on the differences in the fluency of English between the Science and Arts classes:

> It depends on which class you go to...if you go to Science A...they will speak mostly in English whereas if you go to 4 Arts A...I think some of them will start speaking in dialects...and then if you go to Arts B and Arts C.it is in Malay (Yen Ling of 4 Science A).

Most of the 4 Science A girls in their interviews said that this class had priorities for leadership opportunities in the school by virtue of being the best class in Form Four. This following comment illustrates this point:

> It has always been like that...4 Science A are more capable...they are smart...they are responsible...they can be reliable (Yoke Lin of 4 Science A).

Girls in 4 Science A, through their individual and group interviews and essays on their experiences of schooling provided a profile of their class. This profile is one of 4 Science A as a class that stressed academic excellence with an emphasis on hard work, high grades, keen competition and selfishness, that is, a concern with individual

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accomplishment even to the detriment of classmates' success. The girls in this class argued that they also had more opportunities for leadership positions in the school.

5.5.2   4 Arts B

The girls from this class stated in their individual and group interviews that their teachers positioned this class as the most naughty and one of the two academically weakest Form Four classes. They commented that their teachers perceived some of their classmates as 'being noisy', 'very lazy', 'very talkative' and 'rude to teachers'.

Intan of Arts B illustrates this point in her essay on her experiences of schooling:

> Actually they are not that bad but sometimes they are terrible like hell...all the teachers say that 4 Arts B this year is the worst class...they compare our class with other classes (Intan of 4 Arts B).

Sharmala and Su Wei had similar comments in saying that:

> My class is hated by all the teachers...the teachers don't like the class...some of the girls yell at the teachers., .some teachers (Sharmala of 4 Arts B).

> I cannot stand the discipline teacher who complains about the class all the time.. .1 hate that teacher.. .and cannot stand her.. .1 feel like kicking her (Su Wei of 4 Arts B).

Some of the girls from high achieving class, 4 Science A, felt that some of the 4 Arts B girls did not bother about their studies and were not 'stupid'. Some of their peers from Science A and classmates commented that the Malay girls in this class tended to break the school rules. Shariza, a school prefect from Science A commented on this during her individual interview:

> Sometimes naughty...and sometimes you will laugh also...these girls...they wear all these bangles...stuff...you pull up their sleeves and you will see all their bangles there...and they wear the *tudung*...some of them wear the *tudung* because of their hair.. .they dye they hair.. .and don't know how many earrings they wear (Shariza of 4 Science A).

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A profile of 4 Arts B emerged based on the individual and group interviews with the 4 Arts B and some of the Science A girls as naughty, noisy, lazy, rebellious and low achieving.

5.5.3   4 Arts C

The girls from this class stated in their individual and group interviews that they felt that most of their teachers did not like this class. Some of the girls commented that the teachers were boring and did not care for them.   Some complained about the physical aspects of their classroom not being conducive to learning.   Some of the girls in the individual interviews said that they felt ashamed to mix with the girls from the high achieving classes as these girls were intelligent and studious.   This is captured in the comments Hanim of Arts C made in the individual interview.

> I am ashamed to make friends with other classes like Arts 1, Science A and 2 and 3...because they are intelligent...they are good in studies ...and also their attitude...our class always has problems (Hanim of 4 Arts3).

Her classmate, Hasniza also comments on this point in the one-to-one interview.

> Many say that our class is a stupid class...not clever...we are not good in our studies...we have the same brain as others but we find it difficult to understand the lessons...the other classes look down on us...as we are the Commerce class (Hasniza of 4 Arts C).

The girls in this class also felt that the class was discriminated against through the naming and positioning of the class during school activities. Suraya exemplifies this point:

> Even when we line up...we are always the last...because we are the last class...that is not fair...other schools do not have this...4 Science A...4 Science B...and so on...they use names...such as 4 Diamond...4 Jade...but here in Form Four...they use this Science and Arts...why...when other schools don't (Suraya of 4 Arts C).

Some of their peers from Science A commented that the girls in this class perceive themselves to be unintelligent and do not bother studying because of this feeling. Su Mei of Science A commented on the girls in Arts C in her one-to-one interview:

> They feel that they are in Arts C.they feel that they are not as clever as the rest...once they get into that feeling...they tend to just let go...they don't bother working...anymore (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

Some of Science A girls perceived most of the girls in this 4 Arts C class as lacking in English language skills. The Malay girls in this class were perceived by the girls in the top achieving class, Science A, as being very close-minded and not wanting to interact with girls from the other classes. Arts C was described by most of the class as a class that is lazy, weak academically and not having proper facilities for studying. This is illustrated in Hanim's comments in her writing on her experiences of schooling:

> Sooo...bad!!...la2y to do homework, noisy and many more...compared to other classes.. .they like to enjoy much (Hanim of 4 Arts C).

Some of the 4 Science A girls perceive the 4 Arts C girls as having low self-esteem, being close-minded and not interacting with other girls.

Some of the teachers of 4 Arts C commented during my informal discussions with them that most of these girls were quiet and attentive while they were teaching. The teachers added that most of these girls did not ask questions when they did not understand the lesson. They also did not complete their homework. These teachers compared these girls to the 4 Arts B girls who were disruptive during teaching and rude to these teachers. A profile of 4 Arts C that emerges based on the descriptions of the class members, their peers from 4 Science A and their class teachers is that it was a class of quiet, attentive and low-achieving students.

4 Science A is described as a class where the girls were highly competitive, confident, selfish, fluent in English and Malay and having leadership qualities. There was a gap between the high achievers and low achievers in this class. 4 Arts B is described as a naughty, rebellious and low-achieving class and 4 Arts C as a quiet and low-achieving class.

5.6 The girls

In this section, I provide an overall picture of the thirty-five girls who volunteered for my research. The following three tables presented on pages 135 to 142, give an overall picture of these girls in terms of th-^ family background, their academic rankings in their classes and form. The information presented in these tables is based on the personal and academic details I requested from them during the individual interviews. These academic rankings were based on their grades in the subjects of the final Form Four examinations. Their involvement in the co-curricular activities in the school is also listed in the tables. The last column is based mainly on their comments during the one-to-one interviews and some of my observations. I present some of the personal issues they were dealing with at the time of the fieldwork, for example, issues to do with parents, boyfriends, and their studies in this last column.

Most of the 4 Science A girls have parents working in either the professional or semi-professional fields, for example as doctors, bank managers, teachers, engineers. Most of the girls said in the individual interviews that they had positive relationships with their parents. One Malay girl had parents who were in the midst of divorce proceedings during the fieldwork period. Another Malay girl had both

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parents who had divorced and remarried and each had families of their own. Two Chinese girls in this class lived overseas for a few years as their father was working overseas. Some of the 4 Science A girls also have had the opportunity to go for overseas holidays with their parents. All the Chinese girls in this class, while interacting with boys, did not have boyfriends. Most of them said in the individual interviews that studies were more important to them at this stage and they had no time for boyfriends. Some of the Malay and Indian girls in this class have boyfriends. All of the 4 Science A girls took tuition classes for the subjects Additional Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Malay language. The girls from 4 Science A were involved in more co-curricular activities that those from 4 Arts B and 4 Arts C. 4 Science A had 11 school prefects in comparison to 4 Arts B which had no school prefects and 4 Arts C which had 1 school prefect.

Some of the 4 Arts B girls had parents working in the professional fields, for example Naval officer, human resources officer or semi-professional or skilled fields, for example, sales consultant, laboratory assistant. One Malay girl came from a sole parent family as her parents got divorced a few years ago. One Indian girl lived overseas when she was a child. Most of these girls said in the individual interviews that they had arguments with their parents on issues such as going out and boyfriends. All the 4 Arts B girls involved in the study, except for one Indian girl, had boyfriends, some with their parents knowledge and some without. Most of the 4 Arts B girls said that they would take tuition classes in the next year being the year of the important public examination. Most of the 4 Arts B girls were not as active as their 4 Science A peers in co-curricular activities. There was no school prefect in this class.

Most of the girls in 4 Arts C had parents working in the semi-professional or skilled fields for example, clerk, wireman, administrative assistant, tour guide. One Malay girl had parents who were divorced and remarried with their own families. A few of them said that they had arguments with their parents on boyfriends and going out. .A few of the girls had boyfriends, with or without their parents' agreement. Like the 4 Arts B girls, these girls said that they would take tuition classes next year. They too, like their 4 Arts B peers were not active in co-curricular activities. There was one school prefect in this class.

Most of the Malay schoolgirls in this study wore the *baju kurung* in school. In this group of fifteen Malay schoolgirls, four wore the *tudung*. The significance of the *tudung* and *baju kurung* will be discussed in the next chapter on ways of being Malay schoolgirls. All the Chinese girls in the study wore the school pinafore. Most of the Indian girls in the study had long hair and wore the black-dotted *pottu* on their forehead. I will discuss the significance of this in the chapter in ways of being Indian schoolgirls.

The tables on the following pages show that the girls involved in this project come from a range of family and social backgrounds. They have had a variety of social experiences. They were also dealing with different issues at this point in their lives. Some of the issues were to do with interactions with boys and relationships with their parents.

Patternings within and between this group of schoolgirls in ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian girls and their experiences of schooling will be discussed and presented in the next three chapters

Table 5.8: The 15 Malay girls

Name (Class)	Acatk position in class	Acad. position in form	Co-curricular activities in school **	Grade for co-curricular activities	Grade for behaviour	Dressing styles in school	Family background (this information was obtained through the interviews)	Some remarks (this is based on their comments during the individual interviews)
Hazreen 4Science A	37/42	60/200	The Young Islamic Guides, Interact Club, Bowling Club	A	A	Wears the *tudung*	Father is a doctor, mother is a radiologist, has an elder brother who is doing medicine at a public university, lives in a bungalow, family has 3 cars	She has her own room with air-condition, and her own phone
Nabila 4Science A	42/42	118/200	Canteen prefect, Librarian, Bowling Club, IT Club, Young Islamic Guides	A	B	Wears the *tudung*	Father is an executive, mother is a senior assistant architect, she is the eldest with 3 other siblings	Her parents were in the process of getting a divorce during my fieldwork; she also goes to the next class of Science B next year due to her results.
Aniza 4Science A	3/42	3/200	State hockey player, squash player, Young Enterprisers	A	B	Does not wear the *tudung* and wears the *baju kurung*	Her father is the principal of one of the elite *Bumiputera* colleges and mother is the head librarian at the university, has 2 elder siblings doing their pre-university courses	She has some ambivalences about her ethnic identity as her father is an Indian-Muslim and mother is a Pakistani-Muslim, the school classifies her as *Bumiputera* but her siblings did not get those privileges for entrance into the public universities.
Roslina 4Science A .	38/42	62/200	Class monitor, Young Enterprisers, Police Cadet, Computer Club	A	A	Does not wear the *tudung,* wears both the *baju kurung* and the pinafore	Father is retired and mother works in a factory, she is the only child	Her mother is a Chinese-Muslim (got converted when she got married).

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Table 5.8: The 15 *Me*lay girls (contd.)

Name (Class)	Acad. position in class	Acad. position in form	Co-curricular activities in school **	Grade for co-curricular activities	Grade for behaviour	Dressing styles in school	Family background (this information was obtained through the interviews)	Some remarks (this is based on their comments during the individual interviews)
Shariza 4Science A	27/42	Not sure of her position **in the** torm, **in the** 30s	School prefect, does Karate, Computer Club, Young Enterprisers	A	A	Does not wear the *tudung,* wears the school prefect uniform of skirt and blouse	Lives with her step-father who is a Chinese-Muslim (converted upon marriage) and her mother. They work in the State government agency; she has an adopted brother, a step-sister and step-brother; see her father and his family once a week, her father has 2 children with his second wife and her mother has I child with her step-father	Her step-father is a Chinese-Muslim, converted when he got married.
In tan 4 Arts B	16/31	133/200	Red Crescent Society (but was expelled from this society due to poor attendance), school netball flayer	c	B	Does not wear the *tudung,* wears the *baju kurung* but also wears the pinafore	Her parents have been divorced for a number of years, she lives with her mother, her mother is a sales consultant with a jewellery company, has 2 elder siblings r	She left the ethnic category empty, she says thai she *h*$* many different ethnicities *ki* her *- Indian, Arabic, Malay.
Suraya 4ArtsC	3/30	109/200	She is actively involved in the youth wing of the local council, in which she sings and dances	**She told me that she does not know**	A	Does not wear the *tudung,* wearethe *baju kurung*	Father is an assistant administrator and mother is a housewife, she is the eldest and has 4 siblings	Her mother wears the *tudung,* she has frequent arguments with her mother on the proper way a Malay-Muslim girl should behave.

Table 5.8: The 15 Malay girls (contd.)

Name (Class)	Acad. position in class	Acad. position in form	Co-curricular activities in school **	Grade for co-curricular activities	Grade for behaviour	Dressing styles in school	Family background (this information was obtained through the interviews)	Some remarks (this is based on their comments during the individual interviews)
Hasniza 4ArtsC	10/30	145/200	She is the class monitor, Peer Support Group, History and Geography society	B	A	Wears the *tudung* and the *baju kurung*	Her father is a tour bus driver and her mother is a housewife, she has 2 younger siblings	She is trying to get a place in boarding school as she says that she cannot study in her class of Arts C that is very noisy; describes herself as very feminine and gentle Malay-Muslim girl, she is also softly spoken.
Hani 4 Arts C	7/30	142/200	Police cadet	A	A	Wears the *tudung* and the *baju kurung*	Father is a hospital assistant and mother works in the hospital cooperative, she is the eldest and she has 4 younger siblings	She does not feel comfortable leaving the house, feels much safer at home. She was reluctant to share and told me that the questions I pose to her at times are difficult.
Hanim 4 Arts C	12/30	Not sure, approx around 145/200	She told me that she is not active in co-curricular activities	B	A	Does not wear the *tudung,* wears the *bau kurung*	Father is a prison warden and mother is a housewife, she has 4 sisters	Her English is good in comparison to her other classmates, she is reluctant to share her views and opinions with me, she also likes to maintain her fair and smooth complexion and stays out of the sun.
Salina 4 Arts C	13/30	Approx. 150	History and Geography society	She told me that she is not sure of this grade	A	Does not wear the *tudung,* wears the *baju kurung*	Her father is a prison warden and mother is a housewife, has 4 siblings	She says her ethnic identity is Punjabi-Muslim as her father is a Punjabi who converted to Islam upon marriage and her mother is a Malay-Muslim. She speaks fluent Erglish, she too is reluctant to share her opinions and views with me.

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Table 5.8: The 15 MEilay girls (contd.)

Name (Class)	Acad. position in class	Acad. position in form	Co-curricular activities in school **	Grade for co-curricular activities	Grade for behaviour	Dressing styles in school	Family background (this information was obtained through the interviews)	Some remarks (this is based on their comments during the individual interviews)
Rozita 4 Arts C	17/30	**176/200**	Is not involved in any of the co-curricular activities in school	E	B	Does not wear the *tudung,* wears the *baju kurung*	Her parents got divorced 3 years ago and have remarried, she and her younger brother live with her maternal grandmother, Her father is a warren officer in the malaysian airforce and her mother is an administrative assistant	She says that she is not bothered about her studies. She says that she has to have a boyfriend to reinforce her self worth as she does not get this from her family, she skips school a fair bit and was recently caught at her boyfriend's place during school hours, her mother took her out of the school and put her into a school near her in another state, later she came back to this school, most of the interviews would centre around her sharing about her frustrations with her family as well as the happy times with her boyfriends
Safiah 4 Arts B	18/30	Approx 180/200	She did not tell me the activities she is involved in	A	B	Did not wear the *tudung* at the start of the research but wore the *tudung* later, wears the *baju kurung*	Father is a general worker in the government service and mother is an operator, she is the eldest and has 4 younger siblings	Initially she presented herself as a street-wise and wild girl but later toned down telling me that she has changed.
Azlina 4 Arts C	11/30	Approx 150/200	Peer Support Group, Environment Club	B	A	Does not wear the *tudung* and wears the *baju kurung*	Father is a warehouse officer and mother is a scheduler, she has 4 siblings	She *sees* herself as not being beautiful as she is dark-skinned for a Malay, she also feels that she has no friends in the school.

Table 5.8: The 15 Malay girls (contd.)

Name (Class)	Acad. position in class	Acad. position in form	Co-curricular activities in school **	Grade for co-curricular activities	Grade for behaviour	Dressing styles in school	Family background (this information was obtained through the interviews)	Some remarks (this is based on their comments during the individual interviews)
Zakiah 4 Arts C	8/30	Approx 125/200	She is a school prefect, she represented her class in the Form Four English elocution contest, History and Geography society, PRS	A	A	Does not wear the *tudung,* wears the prefect's uniform of skirt and blouse on most days, wears the *baju kurung* on Fridays	Father is a tour bus driver and mother is a housewife, has 4 siblings, she is the only daughter	She wants to study very much at home but she has no time, no space and she has to help out with the housework as the other siblings are brothers. She is trying to convince her parents to send her off to a boarding school next year so as she will be able to concentrate on her studies.

Some general remarks

** It is compulsory for all the Malay/Muslim girls in the school become members of the Islamic Religious Society

* The Malay/Muslim girls in Science A are fluent in both English and Malay, Intan is also fluent in both languages, the Arts B Malay girls are not as fluent in English

* The Science A Malay girls and Intan of Arts B wrote their essays in English, we would also talk in English during the interviews; with the Arts B Malay girls - the essays and the interviews were in the Malay language

* All the Malay girls in 4 Science A go for tuition classes. The Malay girls from the other two classes say that they will take tuition next year, the year of the major examination

* Some of the girls in the study did not know or were not sure of their ranking in the form. I made a logical deduction regarding their approximate ranking by comparing the nearest academic class ranking of their classmates and the corresponding ranking in the whole fonn.

Table 5.9 : The 10 Chinese girls

Name Class	Acad. position in class	Acad. position in the form	Co-curricular activities in school	Grade for co-curricular activities	Grade for behaviour	Family background (this infornurion was obtained through the interviews)	Some remarks (this is based on their comments during the individual interviews)
Ai Choo 4Science A	36/42	52/200	School prefect, Red Crescent Society, Resource Room prefect	B	A	Father is a senior cargo officer in the Malaysian airlines, mother is a clerk, has an elder brother doing his form 6	She says that she does not have as much freedom as her elder brother has.
Gaik Choo 4 Science A	40/42	77/200	Karate, Science and Maths society, Canteen prefect, Editorial board	A	A	Father is a teacher and mother a housewife, has an elder sister in college doing her pre-University studies	She goes down to Science B next year due to her results, she sees herself as a tomboy due to her dressing preferences (pants and shirts, does not like dresses and skirts and earrings) and hobbies (electronics and building) which do not fit the typical dainty and feminine girl
Yen Ling 4 Science A	16/42	17/200	School prefect, Rangers, Science and Maths society, Editorial Board	A	A	Father is a manager and mother is a housewife, eldest in her family and has a younger sibling	She says that she is a staunch Christian.
Siew Lee 4 Science A	20/42	23/200	School prefect, computer club, karate, Young Enterprisers, Peer Support Group	A	A	Father is a doctor and mother a housewife, has an elder sister doing medicine in Singapore :	She lived in Brunei during her primary school days as her father was working there. She was studying in a semi-private school where the medium of instruction was English
Ching Ling 4 Science A	12/42	12/200	Librarian, canteen prefect, school beautifi cation squad, Interact Club, Editorial Board, Computer Club, Peer Support Group	A	A	Father is a teacher and mother a housewife, youngest and has an elder sibling	She has a motor-bike and plays the Chinese harp. She got the highest marks for Additional Mathematics (the subject perceived by the girls to be one of the toughest in the form).

Table 5.9 : The IOChinese girls (contd.)

Name / Class	Acad. position in class	Acad. position in the form	Co-curricular activities in school	Grade for co-curricular activities	Grade for behaviour	Family background (this information was obtained through the interviews)	Some remarks (this is based on their comments during the individual interviews)
SuLin / 4 Science A	21/42	24/200	Interact Club	B	B	Father is an engineer and mother a housewife, has 2 siblings	She lived in America for 6 years as her father was working there as an engineer. She returned to Penang at the beginning of her secondaiy schooling. During the interview, she compares life between USA and Malaysia. She says that she will go back there as soon as she has the chance to do so.
Yoke Lin / 4 Science A	31/42	43/200	Red Crescent Society, Science and Mathematics	A	A	Father is a manager and mother a part-time interior decorator, 2 siblings	She is the only Chinese girl in the research group who goes for Mandarin classes after school
SuMei / 4 Science A	1/42	1/200	School prefect, Editorial Board, Young Enterprisers, Computer Club, Red Crescent Society, Editorial Board	A	A	Father is a bank manager and .mother a part-time editor with a consumer magazine, eldest and has one younger sibling	She goes overseas with family for annual holidays. She goes out every Saturday night to Starbucks café, wears spaghetti straps, missed the prize giving day at the school and went for the Formula 1 racing at the Sepang International Grand Prix, has Internet access at home
SuWei / 4ArtsB	26/31	162/200	Karate, Bowling Club	C	B	Father owns a coffee powder factory and mother is a housewife, 3 siblings	She owns a motorbike and has a boyfriend She says that she does not get along with her parents as they scold her for using the Internet which runs the phone bill very high. They also scold her for going out too often
YiMei / 4 Arts B	27/31	165/200	Interact Club, did not join any uniform bodies at school	C	A	Father is a tourist guide with a local tour company, mother works as a cashier in a five-star hotel, youngest and has 2 siblings	She speaks fluent English. She does not get along with her mother — has daily arguments with her. She feels that her mother takes out her work and personal stress out on her. She has a boyfriend.

Some general remarks

* all the Chinese girls in Science A are taking tuition classes, the two Chinese girls in Arts B are not taking tuition this year but will do so next year
* all the Chinese girls wrote their essays in English. All of them also spoke to me in English in the interviews.

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Table 5.10 : The 9 Indian girls

Name Class	Acad. position in class	Acad. position in the form	Co-curricular activities in school	Grade for co-curricular activities	Grade for behaviour	Physical markers	Family background (this information was obtained through the interviews)	Some remarks (this is based on their comments during the interviews)
Nalini 4Science A	22/42	25/200	Young Enterprisers, Science & Matte, Red Crescent, Librarian, Editorial Board, School Cooperative	A	A	Short hair, no *pottu*	Father is a lawyer and mother is an ex-nurse, lives in a bungalow, has a sister doing her undergraduate studies in Canberra	She has her own room with her own phone and computer. She has been overseas with her family for holidays. She has freedom to move around with her friends but not alone with a guy
Priya 4Science A	41/42	111/200	Probationary Deputy Head prefect, Police Cadet, Young Enterprisers, Secretary of the Editorial Board, Librarian	A	A	Long hair, sometimes wears the *pottu,* a Catholic	Father is a meteorological assistant, mother is an operator, has 2 brothers	She goes down to 5 Science B next year. She had some conflicts with both teachers and her father on her position as the Deputy Head Prefect due to her poor academic results. Her parents do not allow her to go out on her own or with friends.
Bhavani 4 Arts B	1/31	46/200	Class monitor	A	A	Shoulder length hair, wears the *pottu,* has a talisman	Father is a clerk and mother works part-time in the hospital, has 2 elder siblings	She is the top student in her class and is very motivated in her studies. She follows the school rules strictly. Her classmates do not like her as they feel that she tells on them to the teachers whenever they break the school rules.

Table 5.10 : The 9 Indian girls (contd.)

Name Class	Acad. position in class	Acad. position in the form	Co-curricular activities in school	Grade for co-curricular activities	Grade for behaviour	Physical markers	Family background (this information was obtained through the interviews)	Some remarks (this is based on their comments during the interviews)
Revathi 4 Arts B	23/31	156/200	Police Cadet	B	B	Long hair, wears the *pottu,* has a talisman	Father is a lab assistant in the school and mother is a telephone operator, has a sister in a Malaysian university, has 3 siblings	She describes herself as a cheeky and playful girl. She has worked in a factory during the school holidays. She says that she has many guy friends. Her best friend is a guy.
Shanti 4 Arts B	13/31	>131/200	Interact Club, Guidance and Career Club	C	A	Long hair, wears the *pottu,* has a talisman	Father is a Naval officer and mother a housewife, has 2 elder siblings	She has a boyfriend who is working in one of the multinational factories.
Sharmala 4 Arts B	30/31	>162/200	Interact Club, Resource room	B	B	Shoulder length hair, she is a Catholic	Father is a medical assistant in a hospital and mother is a human resources officer in a multinational company, parents studied and lived in England for a few years when she was a child, has 2 siblings	She had a boyfriend.
Rathi 4 Arts C	20/30	>180/200	Guidance and Career Club, School Cooperative	A	B	Long hair, wears the *pottu,* has a talisman	Father is a wireman in the state electricity company and mother is a housewife, only child	She is the only child and has her own room. Her father scolded her when she was seen talking with a boy in her neighbourhood.

Table 5.10 : The 9 Indian girls (contd.)

Name Class	Acad. position in class	Acad. position in the form	Co-curricular activities in school	Grade for co-curricular activities	Grade for behaviour	Physical markers	Family background (this information was obtained through the interviews)	Some remarks (this is based on their comments during the interviews
Punitha 4 Arts C	22/30	>180/200		She told me that she does not know	She does not know	Long hair, wears the *pottu,* has a talisman	Father is hotel telephone operator and mother does baby-sitting in the neighbourhood, has an elder sister	Like her friends Rathi and Sumita, she too was reluctant to answer some of my questions saying that it was too difficult.
Sumita 4 Arts C	23/30	187/200	Guidance and Career Club, School Cooperative, School Welfare Club	B	A	Long hair* wears the *pottu,* has a talisman	Father passed away while she was young, mother has a food stall, has 3 elder sisters	She has a motorbike but is only allowed by her family to use it to go for tuition and around the village.

General remarks

** the Indian girls in Science A wrote their essays and spoke to me in English, some of the Arts B girls spoke in English to me, some spoke both in Malay and English, the Arts C Indian girl were not so fluent in English — they wrote their essays in Malay and the interviews were in Malay and English, they are very fluent in Tamil and I am not

* the Arts C Indian girls also said that some of my questions were difficult and they called me the "why" woman, one of them said that if she has to think about the questions I posed to her it would take her a whole day to answer the questions.

* The two Science A and two Arts B Indian girls go for tuition classes. The rest of the girls say that they will go next year.

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5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described some of the discourses of schooling in which these girls are located. These discourses emphasise academic excellence. There is a privileging of the Sciences over the Arts. Within the Arts stream, there is also a privileging of particular subjects. Not only are classes ranked, so are the girls. The girls are academically ranked in their classes as well as in the overall form. These girls are not only assessed academically but also in their behaviour and co-curricular activities. Students from the top achieving classes are given more opportunities at leadership positions, for example they are school prefects in the school. There is very keen competition among the top academic classes. The education system in Malaysia is one that functions on a system of assessment and educational selection. Connell (1993) states that assessment systems are potent because they shape the form of the curriculum as well as its more obvious content. Furthermore, competitive assessment systems favour particular knowledges and skills; for example, the physical sciences are given more importance. Thus, other forms of knowledges and skills are not given the time and opportunity to be valued and developed within the curriculum. Students' appropriation of knowledges and cultivation of skills proceeds at different paces and along different paths (Connell, 1993). Students' appropriation of knowledges and cultivation of skills proceeds at different paces and along different paths (Connell, 1993). This means that judgements made about individual students' learning at any one point in time should not be converted into essentialised notions of their ability over time, which can then be used to position students as more or less 'worthy'. This of course would also

affect students' self-identifications. Connell states: "competitive assessment produces a particular interpretation of this fact, as a sign of unequal merit - or intelligence, learning capacity, talent, diligence, educability, achievement (there are innumerable variants on the idea)" (Connell, 1993 p.32). He further adds that competitive assessment systems result in: "unequal educational merit of individual students" (Connell, 1993 p.32). There is inequality within an education system that functions on streaming and academic ranking as differences between students along academic abilities are emphasized. These differences are highlighted within an ability hierarchy against a background of other individual learners.

The discourses of schooling emphasise academic excellence, leadership, polite manners, being disciplined and keeping to the school rules. Schoolgirls are rewarded through the ranking and grading system. There are also discourses on ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. The discourse of ethnicity through the politics of ethnic identification imposed by the state is also evident in the schooling and education system as noted in Chapter Two. As stated earlier, the negotiation of this is site specific. This school site is one where the majority of the teachers, top achievers and the students holding the leadership positions are Chinese. There is almost an equal balance of Malay and Chinese girls in this school. In this sense, there is a certain sense of 'Chineseness' prevalent in the school.

How do these schoolgirls construct their self-identification as Malay, Chinese and Indian girls when they interact with these discourses in this specific school site? While there is a prescribed curriculum and academic assessment within this school, schoolgirls also have agency. Do they resist this discourse of academic

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excellence in the midst of constructing their self-identifications? How and why? This research also uses the notion of resistance to understand the patternings between ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls and schooling. In the next three chapters, I present the girls' voices through their writings, individual and group interviews in examining these questions. I also draw on my observations in and out of the school, and informal discussions with the school teachers.

Chapter Six

Ways of being Malay schoolgirls

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss differences in ways of being Malay schoolgirls among this group of fifteen Malay girls. These Malay schoolgirls were clustered into academically successful and academically unsuccessful groups. This clustering is based on the stream and class they were in, and their academic ranking in the form. I next present the patternings within these two groups, in relation to the notion of 'Western' and 'traditional' girl, as discussed in section 4.5 (page 107). These Malay schoolgirls' understandings of the 'traditional' Malay girl are also discussed. Differences in ways of being Malay schoolgirls are presented as these girls negotiate discourses of gender and ethnicity, and discourses of schooling. My reading of the ways these girls engage with these discourses is premised on my discussion with them during the individual and group interviews, their free-format essays, electronic communications, my observations in and out of school and my informal discussions with the teachers.

The discourses of "Muslimness" as a defining feature in the identity of a Malay girl emerged from these girls' writings and interviews. Islam is heard, seen and experienced by these girls daily - the public call of prayer is heard five times a day; the subject Islamic Religious Knowledge is taught in school; the representations of Islam abound in the media and in discussions of nationhood; Islam is ever-present within the family, and in interactions with teachers and school mates.

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This group of Malay and Muslim girls presented the notion of a 'traditional' Malay girl as one who wears the *tudung,* covers the *aurat,* exhibits feminine behaviour and has limited interaction with boys.

This group of fifteen Malay girls constructed their gender identity in a variety of ways and in response to a range of available discourses, namely the discourse of ethnicity as advocated through the politics of ethnic identification by the state, the discourse of schooling and discourse of ways of being Malay and Muslim girls. Differences within these essentialised school groupings are presented as they negotiate these prescribed essentialised discourses on ways of being Malay schoolgirls.

6.2 The fifteen Malay schoolgirls

Fifteen Malay Form Four schoolgirls were involved in this research. Five were from the top achieving class, 4 Science A and ten from the lowest achieving classes, 4 Arts B and 4 Arts C.

The Chinese and Indians have a straightforward classification of their ethnic identity as this identity follows the paternal lineage. For the Malays it is more complicated due to the political implications, namely the special privileges. The definition of Malay becomes more complex in the context of two other issues, namely its 1t^» and constitutional definition and the term *Bumiputera* (Syed, 1981). A Malay is constitutionally defined as a person who professes the Muslim religion, speaks Malay, and conforms to Malay customs (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Loo, 2000; Syed, 1981). All the Malay schoolgirls in this research are Muslims. As noted

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in Chapter Two, all Malays in Malaysia are Muslims and the majority of Muslims are Malays, though not all. These girls have indicated in their demographic information forms that I gave them at the initial stages of the study that they are Malay. According to the political system in Malaysia, Malay means that either the paternal or maternal lineage has pure or traces of Malay ancestry. The school also classifies these girls as Malays. For most, both parents are Malays. There are a few with one Malay parent and the other, non-Malay.

The parents of one girl are both Muslims but they are non-Malays. The school has classified her as *Bwniputera.* She also wrote this down on the form that I distributed to the students on background information. According to the political definition, she would not be classified as a *Bumiputera* as neither of her parents are Malays and therefore she would not be entitled to the special privileges in terms of scholarships. There is a contradiction between her ethnic self-identification and the official ethnic identification. I chose to put her in this group of Malay girls as she herself, the school and her peers see her as Malay. She has a Malay name and wears the *baju kurung* to school. Her ethnic identity is problematic, though ethnic identity becomes a crucial issue only when the special privileges are activated. Even though, as discussed in Chapter Two, the school forms part of the state, her classification of her ethnic identity does not matter at this stage of being a schoolgirl. Her ethnic identity becomes an important point when applying for special privileges such as scholarships and university places. Evidence of ethnicity is given through the birth certificate of the girl, which indicates the ethnicity of the parents. This is the

standard procedure in determining the ethnicity of a Malaysian especially in procedures for university applications.

6.3 The Malay schoolgirls[9] essentialised notion of a 'traditional' Malay girl

In this section, I provide the girls' description of what they identified as characterizing a 'traditional' Malay girl. While they all expressed an understanding of the 'traditional' Malay girl in terms of dressing styles, behaviour and spirituality, these girls negotiated being a Malay girl in different ways. The discourses to which the Malay girls were exposed regarding being a 'traditional' Malay girl are inextricably intertwined with those about being a Muslim girl. These discourses mainly come from the religious classes in school. The curriculum for the subject, Islamic Religious Knowledge, is prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Critical discourses they identified included those linking Malay-Muslim femininity with markers that include the wearing of the *tudung,* wearing of clothes that cover the *aurat,* the need to exhibit gentle and polite behaviour and limit social interaction with boys. Most of the Malay girls talk about the dress codes for Malay girls in the individual and group interviews. These are Islamic and emphasise modesty.

For the Malay girls in this study, the 'traditional' Malay girl refers to a Malay and Muslim girl as one who wears the *tudung,* adopts a style of dressing that covers the *aurat,* has limited interaction with boys, is religious in following Islamic rules by praying, fasting and wearing the proper attire. According to these girls, understandings of the Islamic female identity are prescribed mainly through religious classes in school, and to a lesser extent by family members.

As explained in the Glossary, the *tudung* is the Malay term for head-scarf that Muslim women wear. *Aurat* is the Malay term for parts of the female body that must be covered according to Islamic laws including the hair, arms and legs. *Baju kurung* refers to the Malay female dress of long blouse over long skirt.

6.3.1 **The Islamic religious classes and the Islamic societies**

Most of the girls said in the individual and group interviews that they get most of their knowledge on ways of being Muslim girls and on Islam at school through the subject, Islamic Knowledge, and the school's Islamic co-curricular groups. Some of them get some knowledge on these issues from their parents and grandparents. Some of them add that their parents do not really know much about the religion. The Muslim codes of behaviour and practices and ways of life are a major focus of the s?ibject Islamic Knowledge. They also get the notion of the proper Muslim girl through these classes. For example, Shariza says in her individual interview that the religious classes in school teach her to be a Muslim girl who

> must be patient...generous...must be noble...cannot smoke and drink
> alcohol...we also learn how to pray and fast...we also learn about the
> history of Islam (Shariza of Science A).

It is compulsory for all the Muslim girls in the school to be members of the Islamic Religious Society. The Malays girls in this project told me that this society organises talks by invited speakers once a month. They added in the individual interviews that these speakers give advice on how to be better Muslims.

6.3.2 *Tudung* and *Aurat*

Most of the Malay-Muslim girls said in the individual and group interviews that as a Muslim girl, they should don the *tudung* upon reaching puberty. This point is illustrated in Hazreen's comments in the individual interview:

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> As Muslims we believe that the moment you have your period...everything you do you take responsibility from now on because before that every .mistake you do your parents take full responsibility for that...if you do something wrong...your parents take full responsibility because they are supposed to teach you something right, isn't it...after I got my period I wanted to wear the *tudung* because I believe...we know the repercussions...we believe in all that stuff...so I really wanted to wear.. .you can still be modern by wearing a *tudung.*. .it is not like wrong to wear it (Hazreen of 4 &2tmcc A).

Most of the Malay-Muslim girls said in the interviews that it is in the Koran that men have more sexual lust and desire in comparison to women. They add that the physical form of a woman is seen as sexual in having the effect of enticing and arousing men's desire. They told me that it is the responsibility of the woman through her dress and behaviour to control men's sexual desires. The following comments by the girls in the individual interviews illustrate these points:

> If one wears the *tudung,* you also have to wear loose clothes and long sleeves...this is so as to avoid men disturbing you...this is also to avoid men getting near women and raping them (Roslina of 4 Science A).

> Men when they look at women...they have steam...if she is sexy and pretty...men have steam...women don't have steam...men have an erection...even if the women wears the *tudung*...and when they touch women...men have sexual desires...it can happen anytime...these sexual * desires (Safiah of 4 Arts C).

> According to Islam...the only part of the body that can be exposed are the face and the palms of the hand...the hair, legs and arms cannot be exposed...God says this...it is in the Koran...men cannot see a girl's hair.. .God will get angry (Zakiah of 4 Arts C).

Aniza, said that the emphasis in boy-girl interaction is on communication when one wears the *tudung* and covering the *aurat.* She highlighted this in her following comment in the individual interview:

> You are supposed to cover everything.. .for us right in Islam.. .when you get married...you marry a person cause you know the person...like communication...no sexual or anything...so you actually know the person...other religions don't consider it so important...to not to have any sexual relationships...some get married just for the sake of that (Aniza of 4 Science A).

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Most of these girls told me that even though the wearing of the *tudung* is compulsory for Muslim women, it is not something that is forced upon them. Roslina and Suraya elaborated on this point in their comments:

> Because it is up to you...when your heart says...you want to wear *tudung* and you are wearing because of God...it is okay...but don't wear because of cannot...follow your heart and God (Roslina of 4 Science A).

> I will only wear the *tudung* once my heart is open...having the heart open means having the desire to wear the *tudung* (Suraya of 4 Arts C).

Most of the Malay girls also spoke of the notion of a Malay girl who is gentle and polite in her demeanour. This is illustrated in the following comments during the individual interviews:

> I am a girl...I cannot like...go around and jump...I have to walk properly and sit properly...is I have to be very courteous...I am not myself...I think it is not good...to laugh so loud (Shariza of 4 Science A).

> As a girl...we must be gentle, polite, loving, shy, not overly social...adopt dressing that covers all...only then will others respect us (Hasniza of 4 Arts B).

6.3.3 Praying, fasting and reading the Koran

Most of the Malay girls told me in the individual and group interviews that praying, fasting and reading the Koran are also important aspects of being a Muslim. These are seen by the girls to have a calming effect on their mind and soul. The comments below illustrate this point:

> In being a good Malay and Muslim, one should follow the Islamic concept of religion and pray 5 times a day (Hasniza of 4 Arts C).

> A practicing Muslim girl reads the Koran, does not drink alcohol, does not expose her *our at* and wears the *tudung* (Nabila of 4 Science A).

> I feel at peace when I read the Koran. I read the Koran whenever I am tensed (Suraya of 4 Arts C).

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Some of the Malay girls see Islam as a guiding principle in their lives. Hanim and Hasniza illustrate this in their comments in the individual interviews:

> Because of religion, I am afraid to do something wrong...in having religion...I know what is good and what is bad...we will be afraid to do anything wrong when out of the house if one has religion. ..one will also not do wrong when with their boyfriend...my family is good because we have religion (Hanim of 4 Arts C).

> Without religion, one does not have principles in life. I want to be a success in heaven and on earth.. .to do this.. .1 must not do bad things, not lie, never leave praying, do not argue with parents (Hasniza of 4 Arts C).

> We control our lusts by strengthening our faith and religion...in praying to God...not to go over the limits (Hasniza of 4 Arts C).

6.3.4 Boys

Most of the Malay girls told me that there are limitations in interactions with boys in Islam. This point is illustrated through Hazreen's comments in the individual interview:

> It is normal for a boy and girl to fall in love but we must know the limits.. .why God does not like you to do some stuff.. .cause when they start doing this kind of stuff...they will end up committing fornication/adultery that will result in unwanted kids...As a Muslim girl...you are not supposed, to touch another guy... when you go out and hold hands with guys and go to some place and smooching around.. .and that kind of stuff...it is not a nice thing to do (Hazreen of Science A).

Some of the girls told me that interaction with boys is forbidden in Islam.

The 'traditional' Malay girl is described by most of the Malay schoolgirls as one who wears the *tudung,* covers the *aurat,* prays, fasts and reads the Koran. From their writings and individual and group interviews, the notion of a 'traditional' Malay and Muslim girl encompasses one who is courteous, talks gently, dainty, and walks and sits properly.

6.4 The 'Western[5] girl

Some of the Malay girls in the one-to-one interviews described their notion of the 'Western' girl as one who wore dressing styles that exposed the breast and abdomen, and did not cover the *aurat,* and was fluent in the English language. They also spoke of the 'Western ways' of socialising with boys, and gave the example of holding hands with them. The following comments in the individual interviews are illustrative of some of these points:

> The Western way...not covering our *aurat...* wearing sexy clothes...exposing the breast and tummy...having intimate relations with men...if we follow the Western way...we will be punished when we die (Niza of 4 Arts C).

> Western...everything is so normal...you wear any punky clothes also...no one will say anything...but here everyone will look at the person and start talking...so not so broad-minded and it always so irritating...they can dress whatever lah.. .it doesn't matter (Hazreen of 4 Science A).

> These Malay girls represented the notion of the 'Western' girl as one who

has freedom in social interactions and dressing styles, and is fluent in English,

6.5 The academically successful Malay schoolgirls - balancing between being 'traditional' and 'Western'

There were five Malay girls in this group. They are from 4 Science A, the top class in the form. Most of the girls in this group assume some of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Malay-Muslim girl and some of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl albeit one who complies with what is considered proper for a Muslim girl. The following comment by Hazreen in the individual interview illustrated this balancing between the 'traditional' and 'Western' girl in ways being Malay schoolgirls:

> You have to go with life lah...you cannot just stay at home and not do a thing...that is why they say...you have to know how to adapt with times...you follow the rules...keep to the rules...don't deviate anywhere

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yet...but also try to adapt yourself with the times...as long as it is not something wrong (Hazreen of 4 Science A).

This balancing is seen in their behaviour. For example, Shariza does karate, which does not conform with the characteristics of the 'traditional' Malay girl. Most of these girls have boyfriends but only see them in groups of friends. I have observed these girls wearing short skirts and 'spaghetti strap' tops under a cardigan at the birtliday parties of their peers. The girls in this research use the phrase 'spaghetti straps' to refer to clothing that reveals the shoulder and arms All these girls in this group are also fluent in their English. Hazreen who wears the *tudung* and places much importance on Islam, used the word 'crap' frequently in her conversations and interview with me.

> I am considered a very rough girl...for a girl...I am not as dainty as some people...can sit down and you know...sit down nicely and talk gently.. .from young.. .1 talk a bit rough (Hazreen of 4 Science A).

Shariza in talking about her dressing styles during the individual interview commented:

> I would like to wear spaghetti straps or skirts...my mother sometimes allow me to wear this when I go out with her but not with friends (Shariza of 4 Science A).

Three girls in this group do not wear the *tudung* and two wear the *tudung.* Those who do not wear the *tudung* say that they will do so when they assume most of the behaviour of the 'good' Malay girl. Shariza and Roslina exemplify this point in their comments in the individual interviews:

> Sometimes I am like crazy...sometimes I will jump around...and sometimes I am very moody also.. .so sometimes I get angry very fast.. .so. I don't think I am very good yet (Shariza of 4 Science A).

> If you follow.. .you have to.. .you cannot do this and that such as we cannot mix around with boys (Roslina of 4 Science A).

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Aniza said that it is not suitable to wear the *tudung* now as she is active in sports. Some of the girls also felt that in wearing the *tudung* they would not be able to wear clothing like skirts and tops, the two girls who wear the *tudung* said they felt the 'desire' to do so.

This group of girls has social interactions with boys but they comply with the Islamic rules on boy-girl relationships. They told me in the individual and group interviews that they usually have social interactions with boys in groups of friends and in public places such as shopping complexes or food outlets.

Except for Aniza who is academically ranked third out of 200 girls in the form, the rest of the Malay girls in this group are ranked between 27 and 41 in the class and between 27 and 62 in the form. They do not occupy the top academic positions in the form but they are the Malay girls in the top class and the highest achieving Malay girls in the form. Some of these girls told me in their interviews that they are not satisfied with their examination results. They give reasons such as being lazy, not being able to understand the lessons and not doing enough exercises. The teachers in their informal discussions with me, said that most of the Malay girls in 4 Science A are well-behaved in the class, but they are not as competitive and hardworking as the Chinese girls in the class. The girls told me that they have a tight tuition schedule after school. The Malay girls in the top achieving class are seen by some of their classmates as being proficient in English and having parents from professional backgrounds who value education.

Most of these academically successful Malay girls exhibited conforming behaviour in school in being polite and respectful to teachers, being attentive in class

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and completing their homework and adhering to school rules. This is premised on my observations of these girls in the school as well as through the individual interviews. Like most of their classmates in 4 Science A, they also have a tight tuition schedule.

One girl, Aniza, assumed the rebellious behaviour in school. She war academically ranked the tliird in the form. She received a B grade for her behaviour in the final school report. She said in the individual interview that she thought she got this grade because she was rude to some teachers in addition to being frequently absent from school and coming late to school. She also commented in her interview about the lack of freedom in students expressing themselves:

> If we don't like certain things...the only thing we can do is just complain about it to other student...we cannot go to the teachers cause most teachers consider it unbecoming of a student to question (Aniza of Science A)

During their interviews, some of the Malay girls from the top class, 4 Science A, expressed their individual interviews their opinion on the affirmative action policy which works in favour of the ethnic majority, the *Bumiputeras/Malays* and provides them with scholarships for further study. Additionally, there is the ethnic quota system that favours their entry into public Malaysian universities. During one to one and/or group interviews, some of the Malay schoolgirls from the top class commented that as members of the indigeneous groups they do not work as hard and were not as competitive as the Chinese girls because they were confident they would get scholarships due to this policy. They felt at times, the policy disadvantaged others because even if the *non-Bumiputeras* achieved very good results, they were not rewarded for this through government scholarships. The

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following comments by some of the Malay girls of 4 Science A illustrate these points:

> I kinda pity the *non-Bumiputeras* cause they really need to struggle...and we just have to study and score...and the thing is for university...the non-*Bumiputeras*...sometimes get really great results.. .and they don't get it.. .to come to think about it...it is quite unfair lah (Hazreen of 4 Science A). •

> I think the Malay girls are lazy...I think they are confident that they are going to get scholarships...like some of the Malay girls...they think that Malay...*Bumiputera*...easier to get scholarship...so they don't really care...but the Chinese they will think like...very hard to get scholarships—because everytime...you know for the *Bumiputera*...so maybe they will work harder (Shariza of 4 Science A).

> *Bumis* are getting so many privileges that they don't care anymore lah...they know that they are going to get it...so why bother working so hard...i bet you...there are so many students who get 9Als and did not get any scholarships...and all these average *Bumi* students get 5As 4As...these Chinese are from poor families (Aniza of 4 Science A).

All of these girls aimed to obtain a university degree. Most hope to go to a overseas university on a government scholarship. They were fully aware of the educational privileges they are entitled to through the affirmative action policy.

Most of these Malay girls who were academically successful, assumed most of the conforming behaviour in school, some of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Malay and Muslim girl and some of the 'Western' girl albeit one who complies with what is considered proper for a Muslim girl. There were two exceptions to this patterning and they were rebellious in being rude to the teachers, not paying attention in schs&l and being absent and late to school. This is premised on the individual and group interviews and my observations in and out of the school.

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6.6 The academically unsuccessful Malay schoolgirls

6.6.1 Being more 'Western' than 'traditional'

There were four girls in this group. One was from Arts B and three from Arts C. They were academically ranked between 109 and 180 in the form out of a total of 200. Most of them assumed most of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl. For example, some of these girls wore 'spaghetti straps' and tight fitting clothes even though they were fully aware that as Muslim girls they should wear the *tudung*. All of them said that 'they do not have the desire' or 'their heart is not open yet' to wearing the *tudung*. Some of them said in the individual interview that being active in particular activities for example singing and dancing did not allow them to wear the *tudung*. The following comments during the individual interviews are illustrative of this.

> People will look at me and say...Malay girl wearing spaghetti straps...wow...they say that...some people and girls look at me...I don't know why...it is my body what I want to do.. .or not to do.. .my principle is that as long as I do not wear the *tudung...v/hat* I want to wear I will wear...I know it is very wrong and sinful...but it is better than wearing the *tudung* and then taking it off...that is worse than those who don't wear the *tudung* at all (Intan of Arts B).

> My dressing is average...I like to wear tight fitting clothes...my parents do not say anything.. .it is not over the limit (Suraya of 4 Arts C).

> In the religion there is no forcing...i will wear the *tudung* one day...when I get married I will wear the *tudung* (Safiah of Arts C).

All these girls have a few boyfriends. They said in the individual interview that they could have boyfriends as long as they take care of their honour. Intan provided an example of this point

> I never forget my honour...anybody can be our friends...but we must take good care of ourselves... one must not go and put ourselves in trouble in our interaction with guys (Intan of 4 Arts B).

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These girls are rebellious, noisy and break the school rules. They also do not do their homework in school. All these girls got a B grade for their behaviour in the final school report. For example, Rozita of Arts C told me in the one-to-one interview that she was found by the school principal and school counselor in her boyfriend's flat during school hours. Safiah of Arts B was found by the discipline teacher to be responsible for the formation of gangs in the school. Intan of Arts B told me in the individual interview that the principal called her mother to school to complain about her rude behaviour to the teachers in school-

Most of these girls told me in the individual interviews that they see the relevance of schooling to their future. However, they told me in the individual and group interviews that they find the school and teachers boring, and that the teachers do not care for them. They say that they enjoy school for the interactions with friends. Most of them told me that they find it difficult to follow and understand some of the subjects like Mathematics, Economics and Commerce. All these girls failed Mathematics. Some suggested that they should be allowed to take fewer subjects instead of the current eight subjects that they do. The following comments are illustrative of some of these points:

> Boring...nothing goes in...my mind is blur...I do not want to do more revision...I do not like to study...I like to talk...whatever the teacher says... does not go in (Rozita of 4 Arts C).

> School and teachers are boring...the teachers do not care for us...I am lazy...and feel sleepy when doing my homework and studying (Suraya of 4 ArtsC).

> But I really hate something in this school is - the laws is too strict. Some of the teachers is good enough but some is sucks! I hate Maths...teacher sucks lah...he is boring lah...when I don't understand and I ask him...he will say...talk some more lah...talk some more lah...he will say like that (Intan of Arts B).

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None of these girls are going for tuition classes this year. They said that they would take tuition classes next year, being the year of the major public examination; !/V'. None of these girls see themselves going to university. Intan and Rozita want to be air-stewardesses, Safiah, a chef and Suraya wants to work in the hotel line.

These academically unsuccessful Malay girls assumed most of the characteristics ofths * Western' girl in wearing revealing clothes, having boyfriends, not wearing the *tudung* and not covering the *aurat.* All of these girls were rebellious in school in being rude, noisy and breaking school rules.

6.6.2 'Traditional' Malay schoolgirls

There were six girls in this group. AH of them were in Arts C They were academically ranked between 104 and 150 in the form out of a total of 200. All assumed; most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Malay-Muslim girl. They all wore the *baju kurung* to school. Two wore the *tudung* and four did not. Most of these girls told me during the inter/iew that they did not go out after school on their own or with friends. They only went out with their parents. Most of them did not have boyfriends, and had hardly any interactions with boys. The comments below illustrates these girls' opinion on the *tudung* and *aurat,* and boy-girl interactions:

> If I expose the hair, leg and arms...God will get angry...I am afraid what will happen when I die (Zakiah of 4 Arts C).

> We must pray to God...not to do things beyond ihe allowed limit...like touching here and there.. .kissing (Hasniza of 4 Arts C).

Based on my observations in ihe school and my informal conversations with the teachers, most of these girls exhibited conforming behaviour in being polite and respectful to the teachers, quiet and being attentive in class. However, most of them reportedly did not understand what was being taught and this resulted in them

achieving low grades. The teachers also complained that the girls did not ask them questions on lessons they did not understand. Most of them also did not complete their homework. This group of girls also said in their individual interviews that they were lazy and studied at the last moment for the examinations. The following comments illustrate some of these points:

> Bad lah because if I am number 13...that means I am not far from the last...this class has 29 students...not good...my results are worse lah (Hanira of 4 Arts C).

> I think my attitude is like that...it started when I w*s born...now I become bigger bigger... all change...become more lazy...behaviour also bad...maybe too is natural...maybe I can...if I change...! will do it again...I try to improve...then suddenly it becomes like that...natural (Hanim of 4 Arts C).

Most of these girls say that they enjoyed coming to school because of their friends. They said in the individual interviews that they understood that doing well in their studies is relevant to their future and career. Most of them also said that they found some of the subjects difficult to follow and understand. They added that they were reluctant to ask the teacher as that only confused them further. They also felt that they were average students. Some of the girls felt that the school should take steps to improve the motivation level of the class. Most of the girls also felt that their teachers did not care about them. These comments, made in the one-to-one interview exemplify these points:

> Have extra classes for us.. .after school hours.. .do something during classes to make sure the girls pay attention...take action if the girls don't do their homework and pass up.. .maybe sand is to see the principal if we don't hand up our work...all the teacher does is scold us...no one cared if we do not hand up our school work (Zakiah of 4 Arts C).

> Change the teachers...they are all so angry with us...they don't show it...but sometimes when we do some mistakes...they scold...they don't teach us like what we want...they just take the book...and read from the book...they are fed up...I think...like maybe they got one style only...but

we don't understand...like how they want to teach some more (Hanim of 4 Arts C).

Most of the girls in this group aspire to attain a university degree. Hasniza wants to be a graduate teacher, Zakiah, a lawyer, Salina, a doctor and Azlinar wants to enter university. However, they also told me in the individual interviews that they did not think they would get very high grades in the public examination the following year.

These academically unsuccessful Malay schoolgirls assumed most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Malay girl in wearing clothes that covered most of the *aurat,* had hardly any social interactions with boys, and rarely went out of the house on their own. However, most of them did not wear the *tudung* giving the reason that they were not ready to do so or 'theiv heart is not open yet'. These girls also exhibited conforming behaviour in school in being quiet and attentive in class, respectful to teachers and adhering to the school rules. However, they did not complete their homework and did not understand what was being taught in class. They also failed a few subjects in their final examination.

6.7 Exception to the patterning

In this section, I discuss Nabila who did not fit into the criteria of academically successful schoolgirls. Nabila was in the top achieving class but she was academically ranked low, 118 out of 200 in the form. I observed Nabila sleeping a few times in class, when the teacher was teaching. She was given a B grade for her behaviour in the end of the year school report. She was academically ranked the last girl in the class and was going down to 5 Science B the following year. She commented on this in the individual interview:

> Bad...bad...don't ask about that...last...last in the class...42...in the
> form...the worst lah...lOO plus...I have never got this before...118 (Nabila
> of 4 Science A).

She added in the interview that her parents were not bothered about her results as

they were in the midst of getting a divorce and they fought most of the time.

6.8 Ways **of being Malay schoolgirls in relation to Indian and Chinese schoolgirls**

In this section, I present how these Malay girls see tliemselves in relation to Indian

and Chinese schoolgirl. This provides the interethnic dynamics in ways of being

Malay schoolgirls within this school.

As illustrated in the comments below, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls are

seen as being trendy and wore 'sexy' clothes in comparison to Malay girls who were

supposed to cover up their *aural*

> Chinese and Indian girl wear sexy clothes.. .the Western way.. .Malay girls
> are supposed to wear clothes...to cover the *aurat...v/Q* have to take care of
> the image of Islam...it is a sin if we don't cover the *aurat* (Hasniza of 4
> ArtsC).

> Chinese girls wear sexy clothes (Roslina of 4 Science A).

> Chinese girls are trendy...they wear shorts...jeans...and top with sports
> shoes (Hanim of 4 Arts B).

As noted earlier, in this chapter on the section on academically successful Malay

schoolgirls, these girls saw themselves as not as hardworking and competitive in

relation to the high achieving Chinese girls due to the affirmative action policy.

Some of the Malay girls in this study pointed out in the individual interviews

that some of the schoolteachers displayed favouritism towards the Chinese

schoolgirls. The following comments made by some of the Malay girls illustrate

this point

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> Some of the Chinese teachers always try to find the Malay and Indian girls fault...but never look at their own...the Chinese teachers are all like that...everywhere you go...every school is like that...they only want the Chinese students to do well (Intan of 4 Arts B).

> Our religious teacher told us...the Chinese teachers say...the Malay students bring down the standard of the school...she said...aren't you all ashamed...to hear others say this like (Suraya of 4 Arts B)

One of the Malay schoolgirls, a school prefect commented that the majority of school prefects in this school are Chinese.

> Most of the prefects are Chinese...there are very few Malay prefects...the Chinese prefects usually ask the Malays to do the work...while they chat away (Zakiah of 4 Arts B).

These comments made by some of the Malay girls in the individual interviews reiterates the 'Chineseness' of this particular schooling site.

6.9 Competing discourses: the discursive influences on ways of being Malay schoolgirls

In this concluding section of this chapter on ways of being Malay schoolgirls, I discuss the discursive influences on the girls. These Malay and Muslim schoolgirls negotiate their identity by manipulating a range of available discourses. There is an understanding of what it is to be a Muslim girl and this understating comes from the religious subject in school and their families. The discourse of Muslim femininity is linked to a structure, to an institutional practice that in Malaysia is profound and patriarchal. This comes from the state and the religious authorities that are dominated by Malay and Muslim men.

Islam is a dominant factor in these girls' gender identity. An essentialised notion of the 'traditional' Malay girl emerged from the girls' free-format essays, individual and group interviews. There are markers as prescribed by both Islam and

the Malay culture - the *tudung,* dressing that covers the *aurat,* feminine behaviour and limited interaction with boys. The ways in which these markers are manifested in these girls' self-identifications differ due to notions of agency and processes of negotiation. Most of the girls feel that once one dons the *tudung,* the behaviour, dressing, patterns of interaction with boys and social activities should change. The girls feel that their behaviour should be more subdued and controlled. The forms of dressing of the *tudung* and covering the *aural* is seen by the girls as a deterrent for sexual misbehaviour such as physical contact between the sexes and sexual intercourse. This form of dressing is understood to control men's sexual desire. One girl said that the Islamic dress code for women allows for communication between men and women without sexual attraction. This attire does not deter them from participating in various school activities in and out of the school or interacting with boys. It does not affect their behaviour or performance as a student within the school. There are Malay girls who don this form of Muslim female attire in both the high and low achieving classes. While there is the essentialised notion of the 'traditional' Malay and Muslim girl in forms of dressing styles, behaviour and spirituality, there are difference within this group of Malay girls as they negotiate these essentialised notions.

Most of the Malay girls in this research group did not wear the *tudung* to school. The Muslim girls might have felt more comfortable exposing their *aurat* in an all girls' school. Furthermore, most of the teachers are Chinese in this school. As such, the pressure to don the *tudung* in this school would not be as urgent as in a

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mixed sex school and/or a school where the majority of the female teachers are Muslims who don the *tudung*.

Malay-Muslim women's gender identity has evolved in response to discourses of Islam and discourses of modernity (Mohamad, 2001; Omar, 1996; Othman, 1998). Mohamad (2001) states that in the history of Malaysia's Islamisation, Muslim women are wedged between the liberal-modern state discourse of Islam and the fundamentalist Islam that is advocated by the religious authority of the Government and the opposition Islamic party. The notion of "woman as wife and mother" rather than citizen, worker or student is often dominant among the traditional Islamists (Othman, 1998) or fundamentalist Islamists. The Malaysian government encourages women to pursue higher education, join the workforce and actively participate in tile economy of the country (Anwar, 1998). The state's ideological construction of the modern Malay-Muslim woman is someone who is a well-educated professional, and a woman who nurtures a family and adheres to cultural mores (Wong, 2001a). Thus, government policy on women and traditional Islamic teachings, which are patriarchal, provide Malay Muslim women with messages on their roles as citizens, wife and mother. As Anwar notes,

> This has led to much confusion and conflict among women who on one hand want to be good Muslims, but on the other hand want the right to higher education, to a career, to a marriage based on equal partnership, and do no want to suffer the abuse and injustice inflicted by men who beat them, who practice polygamy, who demand obedience, all justified in the name of Islam (Anwar, 1998 p.20).

There are multiple and contradictory ways of being Malay women arid girls as seen with this group of fifteen sixteen year old schoolgirls. Being a Malay girl is complicated.

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The form of Muslim female dressing does not in anyway affect these girls' educational opportunities. The Islamic form of female dressing also does not guarantee that a girl would be modest in her behaviour. This is seen in Hazreen who dons the *tudung* and *baju kurung* but sees herself as a rough girl and uses the word 'crap' frequently. Roslina, Salina, Hanim do not don the Muslim form of female attire but see themselves as feminine. There are different and contradictory ways of being a Malay-Muslim girl. There is also no urgency for some of them to wear the *tudung* at present. On the basis of my research at this particular school, it appears that the form of Muslim dressing that is the *tudung* and the covering of the *aurat* does not affect their educational outcome. There are Malay schoolgirls who don the Muslim ways of being a girl in both the high and low achieving classes. Mohamad (1994) in discussing the veiling of Muslim women in Malaysia states,

> A Muslim woman who chooses to veil has the transparent and direct knowledge as to who or what she is addressing in that the decision can directly be traced either to God[1]!} command, the prophet's decree, husband's wish or to peer persuasion (Mohamad, 1994 p. 131).

She further asserts that the veil is really a prescription for appearance and not behaviour. A Malay woman's dress and external appearance provide no guide as to her other qualifications or to her personal qualities and interests (Nagata, 1995). There is no direct correlation between dress styles and the willingness to pursue a public or professional career. Muslim women don the veil for public acceptance among Muslim males and also with other Muslim women who seek collective reinforcement for strategic career-moves in politics or public management (Mohamad, 2001; Nagata, 1995). Donning the veil then is a strategic and political move on thss part of Malay and Muslim women for community acceptance. The

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notion of the Malaysian-Malay-Muslim woman that is represented through the literature review (Anwar, 1998; Mohamad, 1994, 2001; Omar, 1996; Othman, 1998; Wong, 2001a), is one located within the contradictory and competing discourses on ways of being Malay and Muslim women. There is the state's liberal discourse of Muslim female identity and the religious clerics' discourses of Muslim female identity that can range from moderately liberal to a fundamentalist one, *adat,* and discourses of modernity.

The Malay girls also negotiate other discourses. There is the discourse of ethnicity that is manifested through the affirmative action policy, This affects these girls' role as students. As some of them said in the individual interviews, the affirmative action policy guarantees them a place in the university with mediocre results. However, as argued for in Chapter Five, there is a sense of 'Chineseness' that is evident in this particular school. The dominant discourse of the school is the product of 'Chineseness' as most of the top achievers, school leaders and teachers are Chinese. The dominant discourse of Chinese scholarship is one that emphasizes academic excellence and keen competition. We construct our ways of being and knowing in relation to others and the context. The Malay girls especially those in the high achieving class are in a class where majority of the girls are Chinese. The Malay girls are also exposed to this discourse through the Chinese teachers who emphasise high grades and hard work. This might not coincide with the dominant discourse of Islam and the discourse of politics of ethnic identification via the affirmative action policy.

The girls are negotiating what it means to be a Malay and Muslim schoolgirl that may or may not reinforce the dominant school discourse. Discourse is linked to the state and to the school. It is not uniform. There are different ways of being Malay schoolgirls within this group of fifteen girls. The differences in their self-identifications are along the lines of dressing styles, interactions with boys, behaviour in school as to whether they are conforming or rebellious, and their general attitudes towards schooling (for example the relevance of schooling to their lives).

A combination of the 'Western' and 'traditional' girl is linked to being academically successful in school. Most of these girls exhibit conforming behaviour in school in being polite and respectful to teachers, quiet and attentive during class, doing their homework and adhering to the school rules. There are two groups of academically unsuccessful Malay schoolgirls in this research. The 'traditional' Malay-Muslim girl is linked to being academically unsuccessful in school. These girls are conforming in being polite and respectful to teachers and adhering to school rules but they do not do their homework. There is also a group of academically unsuccessful schoolgirls, who are more 'Western' than 'traditional' girls. All of these girls exhibit rebellious behaviour in school in being noisy, lazy, rude to teachers and collect demerit points as they break the school rules.

In the following chapter, I present and discuss the ten Chinese schoolgirls.

Chapter Seven

Ways of feeing Chinese schoolgirls

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the differences in ways of being of the Chinese schoolgirls in this study. I discuss their understandings of the essentialised notion of the 'traditional' Chinese girl based on the individual and group interviews and their free-format essays. As with the Malay girls, I have clustered the ten Chinese girls into two groups, academically successful and academically unsuccessful. With these two groups, I present patternings in relation to the notion of the 'Western' and 'traditional' Chinese girls. Differences in ways of being Chinese schoolgirls are presented as they negotiate the discourses of gender that include, ways of being 'traditional' Chinese girls and 'Western' girls, discourses of ethnicity, the affirmative action policy and the discourses of schooling. I draw on the girls' self-inscriptions in the free-format essays, the interviews, observations in and out of the school and my informal discussions with the teachers in my discussions of the different ways of being Chinese schoolgirls.

7.2 The ten Chinese schoolgirls

Ten Chinese Form Four schoolgirls were involved in this research. Eight were •from the top achieving dass, 4 Science A and two were from 4 Arts B.

This group of ten Chinese girls presenied the motion of a 'traditional' Chinese girl as one who speaks Chinese language, is hardworking, one who thinks

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far ahead, always wants to win, values the importance of money, is materialistic and displays *kiasu* attitudes and behaviour.

7.3 The notion of a'traditional'Chinese schoolgirl

The notion of the 'traditional' Chinese girl emerged from the individual and group interviews. Most of the girls described the 'traditional' Chinese girl in relation to Chinese culture to mean watching Chinese movies, speaking Chinese dialects, working hard, appreciating the importance of money and having *kiasu* attitudes and behaviour. These girls also spoke of the Chinese ideals of being materialistic.

7.3.1 Chinese ideals

This group of Chinese girls constructed their gender in relation to what they described as the Chinese way of thinking. The Chinese way of thinking includes being materialistic, appreciating the importance of money, thinking far ahead and working hard. Su Mei exemplified this point in the one-to-one interview:

> The Chinese are very money-making consciences.. .and they make money more than they enjoy...they make money but cannot take it to their grave.. .but they die rich.. .and they have never enjoyed .. .1 think you can sum it up by saying that they are told to study hard and after that work harder to make money...then they work harder to make more money....and more power and they die and they don't take it with them (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

Some of these Chinese girls from the top class stated in the individual and group interviews that the characteristic of working hard to achieve is part of the Chinese heritage. They argued that the Chinese were often in situations improving their economic and social situations relying on their hard work.

7.3.2 Language

Most of the girls said that Chinese language is one of the defining features of being Chinese. All these Chinese girls with their varying degree of fluency in the Chinese

languages or dialects see themselves as Chinese. A few girls were learning Mandarin and a few spoke the Hofckien dialect at home. Most spoke mainly English at home with minor inclusions from various Chinese dialects. One of the girls expressed this link between the Chinese language and the Chinese identity in her individual interview:

> Cause I feel like I am a Chinese and so I must know my own language, right...and my Mum is Chinese-educated...my Dad is English-educated, so I go to English school but I still have to know Mandarin (Yoke Lin of 4 Science A).

1.3.3 'Kiasu*

The notion of the *'kiasu'* Chinese schoolgirl emerged from the one-to-one and group interviews with most of the Malay, Chinese and Indian girls in the top class and their essays on their experiences of schooling. The *'kiasu'* Chinese schoolgirl as described by these girls is one who is a top achiever, competitive, selfish, always wanting to win and afraid to lose. The following comments made by two of the top achieving Chinese girls in the individual interviews illustrates this point:

> *Kia* means in Hokkien...afraid...like scared...and su is lose...so afraid to *lose...kiasu* in not only exam...you go to buffet...they are also *kiasu...\hey* have paid that much...and they have to eat their money's worth...they are afraid of losing out in everything (Yen Ling of 4 Science A).

> *Kiasu* means knowing that if I do not study hard...I won't get what I want...if lose out...it is because they must have studied harder...I don't complain...I deserve what I get (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

The top achieving Chinese girls and their peers described the Chinese girls with a *kiasu* attitude as one who is afraid to lose and always wants to win. They also said in the individual interviews that the top achieving Chinese girls had the *kiasu* attitude as they were concerned with the marks they got out of the examination.

7.4 The 'Western' girl

Most of these girls in their individual and group interviews also described the 'Western' girl in reference to fluency in the English language, watching and reading Western media material, being trendy in dressing styles and having freedom in social interactions with boys. The following comments in the individual interviews are illustrative of this.

> Actually we think in a Western way...we are kinda influenced...I suppose...I don't know much about...I do know culture like I do other cultures...history sort of thing...but I don't practice it...we speak English at home.. .we eat Western and Chinese food...1 don't own a cheongsam...1 watch English movies...Western productions...read books written by Westerners...so we may not all be Westerners but we are influenced (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

> Being English educated is up dated as they follow the American style...western style is more updated than traditions and customs...the US-West is very advanced in fashion and everything (Yi Mei of 4 Arts B).

> If they are up dated...up dated is like...okay...every year things change...like technology...getting better and better...and all those trends...clothes...the way you wear...things like that...and more open-minded like that (Yi Mei of 4 Arts B).

One of the Chinese girls explained 'open-minded[5] as being able to talk about sex and related issues.

The Chinese girls involved in this research told me in the interviews that the current trend in dressing styles was 'spaghetti straps'. During the one to one interviews, some of these girls stated that the wearing of 'spaghetti straps' is perceived by teachers and their peers as being associated with lots of boyfriends, drinking and smoking and being indecent.

These girls represented the notion of the 'Western' girl as one who has the freedom in dressing styles and social interactions, and is fluent in English.

7.5 The academically successful Chinese schoolgirl

Eight Chinese girls from the top class volunteered for this research. Five were in the top 20 academic position in the class and form. Their academic ranking in the form were 1,12,16, 23 and 24. Three were in the lower end of the top class with academic rankings of 43, 52 and 77.

7.5.1 The most *'kiasu[1]* and most "Western' Chinese schoolgirls

All of these girls assume most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Chinese girl and most of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl. These five Chinese girls were highly competitive and placed much importance on getting high grades and maintaining their high academic ranking. They attributed this to the competitive nature of 4 Science A. The following comments in the one-to-one interviews are illustrative of this:

> It is like competitive...your friends are getting high...would you want to get low.. .no right.. .you want to get high...1 want to get high.. .1 want to'get into good university.. .get good results (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

> Once you start doing well...you want to maintain that...and then if you do well the next time.. .you still want to do well the next time and it gets harder as you go...I have become so used to do well and being first...I have to work hard enough to be the best (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

These high achieving Chinese girls have a tight tuition and study schedule. Most of these girls said in the individual interviews that they go for tuition to get extra revisions and variation in the exercises. Fong Ling and Siew Lee described their tuition schedule in the one-to-one interview. This is indicative of the tuition schedules of the other girls in this group.

> I am so busy with tuition...everyday...Monday to Friday...mostly in the evenings...from 5 to 7pm, 6 to 8pm...Monday is like a whole stretch...6 to

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> 8pm...8.15pm to 9.20pm...so I am too busy with my studies...I take tuition for all subjects except Biology and Moral Studies (Fong Ling of 4 Science A).

> I go for Chemistry...cause sometimes she goes so fast...so I go for extra revision...and Physics...you know the calculations and all that...cause I am not too sure...I can ask my tuition teacher...Additional Mathematics...my teacher is kinda slow.. .or she doesn't really explain much.. .so I can ask my tuition teacher...and Malay...my Malay teacher is terrible...and you can see in class how my teacher teaches...that one I definitely need tuition (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

They were outspoken. They also challenged their teachers as noted in Chapter Five in the section on the profile of 4 Science A. In my informal discussions with some of the class teachers, they pointed out that these girls answered back and challenged the teachers in class. In her essay on her experiences of schooling, one of the girls described most of the teachers in the school as 'being very rigid and they keep trying to make us feel small...like ants!'. Su Mei illustrates this point in the individual interview:

> They never want to listen to our opinions...or of they do they'll condemn us...sometimes we like to say...why can't we have more say in certain things...and when we argue back...why should that be seen as more of an impertinence...why can't we have simple argument that is because of the argument and not personal... they take everything personal... if you criticise the school system...they think that you are criticising them (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

Most of the girls in this group said during the individual and group interviews that they found schooling hectic, filled with much work and co-curricular activities. One of the girls expressed it in the following way that summarised the attitudes of this group of top achieving Chinese girls:

> Our school life is just one long story of being polite and doing loads of work. We have sooo many extracurricular activities with tons of deadlines! We learn 9 - 10 subjects including silly things like moral...it is so dumb. All it does is to teach you to lie...and we haven't talked about tuitions yet! (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

They also felt that schooling was too examination oriented and the teachers were boring. However, as illustrated above, these girls are highly competitive and totally focused on obtaining very high grades for their examination as that gave them more options in the education pathways they can pursue after schooling. Most of these girls aimed to go overseas for their education, as illustrated in the comments below from the individual interviews:

> I don't plan to go to local university...I plan to go to a college...either A levels or HSC or SAM...Australia is the cheapest compared to others (Yen Ling of 4 Science A).

> I want to go somewhere.. .America or something.. .and it would help if I did very well (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

Su Mei aimed to do actuarial science, Siew Lee, medicine, Fong Ling, engineering, Yen Ling, law and Su Lin, social work.

This group of high achieving girls also expressed their frustration at the ethnic bias in the present education system that is not based on merit. These girls' awareness of the ethnic politics through the affirmative action policy also pushed them to achieve academically. The affirmative action policy, as noted in Chapter Two, accords special educational and economic privileges to *Bumiputeras.* This is illustrated by the comments below in the individual interviews:

> It makes me feel what is the point if I get high marks... in the end it is going to be the *Bumiputeras...I* am trying to work hard...because of that...not because of Malaysia...but because of the possibility of me getting into another country to study...it is so unfair here...it is so bias...very bias...I am not saying the *Bumiputeras* are bad...they are not...it is just that the system sucks (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

> Like all these biasness...that is why all the good students...whatever race...get out of the country straight away when they can (Siew Lee of 4 . Science A).

These girls in the one to one interviews commented that the education system is ethnically biased as it favoured the *Bumiputeras* without requiring the best results from them. These girls also felt that the Malay girls were not hardworking due to this policy. They added that Chinese were more hardworking as they knew they would not receive the benefits that the Malay girls receive.

Some of these girls also commented on the standard of Malaysian universities:

> Not good...everybody knows...but if you have the money...you would not choose to do your degree here...so many Malays...they give too much benefits to them...it is not so nice (Yen Ling of 4 Science A).

Most of these girls in the individual and group interviews also acknowledged the relevance of schooling to making them independent and strong individuals as well as a necessity for university entrance. This point is illustrated in the comment below:

> I want to earn a lot next time...cause 1 want to spend a lot...on stuff...on clothes...food (Fong Ling of 4 Science A).

> Makes you independent...stronger...you learn to go against people...you have to do things on your own...and responsible...cause you have to get things done...and you have to answer to them if they go wrong...and also generally universities require you to have *SPM*...so you have to go through the whole process (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

As noted in Chapter Five, most of these girls advocated a streaming system because of the match between the learning abilities of the girls and teaching pace of the teachers.

This group of Chinese girls conversed in English more than in their various Chinese dialects. This is illustrated in Siew Lee's comments in the individual interview:

> Like when I mix with Chinese friends...they start talking Hokkien...they start talking Mandarin...Cantonese...and they start talking about the

> Chinese soap operas and all that...you know I don't watch that...so I don't know what it is all about...I don't speak Hokkien that well...I try speaking when I can...but I cannot get the intonation right...I try lah...I am still a Chinese (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

Tliese top achieving Chinese girls told me that they had interactions with boys but did not have boyfriends at this stage due to the importance of studies. They said that this was also due to their parents' emphasis on studies. Some of the girls in this group said in the one-to-one interview that they went out on weekend nights to restaurants like Coffee Beans and Starbucks. As stated in Chapter Five, the top achieving girls in 4 Science A were seen by their other classmates as having a good balance between their social and academic life. Su Mei exemplified this point in her essay on the experiences of being a girl.

> Coz though I do well, I love to have fun!!! But of course when it is time to study I DO!

They wore fashionable clothing including some which would be considered revealing by traditional Malay or Indian standards. Most of these girls in the group interviews commented that Chinese girls were more daring in their dressing in wearing 'spaghetti straps' and low necklines. They added that the Malays did not dress like the Chinese as the Malay culture and Islam does not permit girls to expose their arms and legs. They also said that Indian girls are seldom seen in 'spaghetti straps'. 'Spaghetti strap' style was seen by teachers and girls as being 'indecent'. For example, Su Mei provides an example of this attitude:

> Indecent to them lah...to them spaghetti straps would be indecent...so if you wear that you must be the kind of girl that has a lot of boyfriends and you know... drinks and smokes and that kind of thing (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

These Chinese girls who were academically successful, assumed most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Chinese girl in being *kiasu,* hardworking and materialistic. They also assumed most of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl in being trendy in their dress styles, having interactions with boys, being fluent in English and watching Western media productions. They also assumed some of the conforming behaviour in school in doing their homework, being hardworking and keeping to the school rules. However, they also displayed rebellious behaviour in school in challenging their teachers in class, being rude to the teachers and being overconfident by the teachers' standards and some of their peers' standards in school.

7.5.2 Less 'Western' and less [i]*kiasu*[j]

There were three girls in this group. These girls were in the top class, 4 Science A. They were academically ranked 43, 52 and 77 out of a total 200 in the form. All of these girls assumed some of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl and a few of the characteristics of the *'kiasu'* girl. They saw themselves as not doing well in their studies. All of them in the individual interview said that they needed more self-discipline in their studying. This is illustrated in the comment below:

> I have slacked in my last exam results...I have had a lot of distractions...like the television...my discipline in studies is not strong enough (Yoke Lin of 4 Science A).

These girls said in the individual interviews that they had a tight tuition schedule. They said that they would not be able to cope in school if they just relied on the school lessons and exercises. These girls had mixed feelings about the streaming practices. They said that it was fair in having high achieving students in the top

class. They commented that there was pressure on those who did not do well in school and were looked down upon especially by the high achievers.

The three girls found it stressful being in the best class. They also felt left behind in the teaching and learning pace of the class. This is illustrated in the comment below by Ai Choo in the individual interview:

> There is much stress in 4 Science A...everybody is working...if you are left behind...you are really left behind (Ai Choo of 4 Science A).

One of the girls characterised the assumptions the teachers had of the class girls by virtue of being in the top class and taking tuition classes.

> I want to teach that chapter...I think you sure already know that...you all sure go for tuition.. .so don't waste time on that (Yoke Lin of 4 Science A).

They said in the individual interview that schooling is necessary for their future as good grades are needed for entrance into university and a good career. Gaik Choo illustrated this point.

> So you have all the basics...so when you further your studies...you have some knowledge...you know like what you are going to do after schooling...and you get to prepare yourself (Gaik Choo of 4 Science A).

This group of girls also commented on the unfairness of the affirmative action policy that does not reward them for their hard work. Yoke Lin provides an example of this point in her comment in the one-to-one interview:

> It is a sensitive issue.. .look at our class.. .only 6 Malay girls.. .3 Indian girls and the rest Chinese...sometimes...you look at the last class...they are usually the Malays...why does this happen...I don't know...but it is like that...I really want to know why...it is not that we are smarter or anything...maybe we are more hardworking...cause the Government already give them all the stuff...they don't really have to work hard (Yoke Lin of 4 Science A).

All the three girls aimed to enter university. Ai Choo and Gaik Choo wanted to pursue a degree in engineering and Yoke Lin, medicine.

This group of academically successful Chinese girls assumed some of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl in being fluent in English and interacting with boys. They also wore trendy clothes but not 'spaghetti straps'. They also assumed some of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Chinese girl in being hard working but did not assume the *kiasu* attitude and behaviour. All of them assumed conforming school behaviour in being polite, attentive in class and adhering to the school rules.

7.6 The academically unsuccessful Chinese schoolgirls

These two low achieving Chinese girls were academically ranked 162 and 165 out of 200 in the form. They exhibited rebellious behaviour in collecting demerit points through breaking the school rules, being lazy and not doing their homework. In my informal discussions with them, the teachers described the group of Chinese girls in 4 Arts B as the 'problem' Chinese girls in the form as they were rude, lazy and stubborn. Su Wei told me that she obtained a B for her behaviour in the end of the year school report as she had collected eight demerit points.

Both these girls said in the individual interviews that they were aware of their poor performance in the examinations. They this attributed to a lack of self-discipline. The following comments are illustrative of this point:

> No self-discipline...it is only in studies...the rest all...I seem to be good in it...I mean...my thinking...I know what is right...what is wrong...I know what is going on...everything...the only problem is that my studies make other people think I am not smart...and I don't know how to think (Yi Mei of 4 Arts B).

> I don't really care...like I don't really care and I do care in a way...I do know how to worry that I fail or whatever...I am sure everybody wants to do well...so I just have to strive...have to really really work hard (Yi Mei of 4 Arts B).

> I got mood then I will study...if not...I will do all sorts of nonsense like talk stupid things, don't pay attention to the teacher and a lot lah (Su Wei of 4 Arts B).

> Sometimes I hate to do homework...it makes me sick...see all the words (Su Wei of 4 Arts B).

Su Wei said that she went for tuition twice a week to improve her Maths. Yi Mei said that she would go for tuition next year, it being the important exam year.

They said in the individual interviews that they found school and the teachers boring. Su Wei expressed this in her free-format essay on her experiences of schooling.

> Sometimes I felt it is very bored and lifeless...sometimes I also hate the teacher that always like to scold me...also sometimes I don't give a damn on the teacher (Su Wei of 4 Arts B).

They also wanted teachers who had interest in the welfare of the girls and did not just focus on their sole duty of teaching. Yi Mei exemplified this point in the one-to-one interview:

> I like the teacher to teach in a...like she has really got interest to come and teach is...like some teachers...they teach is...they just teach...teach...teach and go out.. .they don't care about us (Yi Mei of 4Arts E).

Both of them in the individual interview said that they liked schooling as they got to talk and joke with friends.

Su Wei's ambition was to become an interior designer and Yi Mei, an air-stewardess as she preferred to work with people rather than do paper work.

They have boyfriends and have freedom in their dressing styles. These two girls told me in the individual interview that they have boyfriends so as to feel loved and cared for, which they do not get from their relationship with their parents. They are seen by their peers as having an active social life in going out and having boyfriends. Both girls said in the individual interview that they go out often with

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both their friends and boyfriends. They usually go to the shopping complexes. They also said that their parents were not happy with them for having such an active social life. Based on my observations and interviews with these two girls, I judged that they were not as fluent in English as the academically successM Chinese girls.

These two academically unsuccessful Chinese girls assumed some of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl in being trendy in their dressing styles, having boyfriends and speaking in English. They assumed few of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Chinese girl. They exhibited rebellious behaviour in school in being lazy, not doing their homework and being rude to teachers at times.

7.7 Being Chinese schoolgirls in relation t* Indian and Malay schoolgirls

Most of the Chinese girls in the individual and group interviews commented that Chinese girls had more freedom in dietary habits, dressing styles and religious practices especially in relation to the Malay girls. This is exemplified in the following comments:

> You do realise that Chinese have more freedom...we can eat anything...like Indians cannot eat beef and Malays cannot eat pork....we do not have to go and pray.. .like definitely.. .like the Malays have to pray five times a day...more freedom (Fong Lingof 4 Science A).

> Religion lah...but it is kinda sensitive lah...if you are in Malaysia...I would say I prefer to be a Chinese...because I have nothing against Indians...but Malays...why do they have to wear the *tudung...yon* know the Arabs...it is a man-powered world in that side...it is true isn't it...they are wearing black and all covered.. .but then why would you want to do it...I mean God give them not to hide it...why would you want to wear all black? (Fong Lingof 4 Science A).

Some of the academically successful Chinese schoolgirls commented in the individual and group interviews on the lack of competitive spirit among the Malay

schoolgirls. Two of the girls expressed it in the following way that summarises the attitudes of these girls.

> We do better.. .the Malays are more easy going.. .they don't bother about their future...Chinese think very far ahead...they want to succeed in life...money...money...money...so have to work harder (Siew Lee of 4 Science A).

> Actually...from history and all...the Malays...they are very laid back people...so if their parents are not that educated...they don't push...generally the children just take life as it comes...maybe it is because...the Chinese are more *kiasu...and* they place more importance on winning...and doing well...and that kind of stuff...I suppose it goes back to our culture long long ago (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

Indian girls were generally seen by this groups of Chinese girls as being average in their academic performance. Su Mei provides an example cf this point in her comment below:

> There are Indians who do well and there are Indians who don't...in our class the Indians are somewhere near the top...some of them are not...it is just normal (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

7.8 Competing discourses: the discursive influences on ways of being Malay schoolgirls

These Chinese schoolgirls' understandings of the 'traditional' Chinese girl corresponds with some of the dimensions of the Chinese identity that include Confucian values such as self-cultivation based on education, a valuing of their Chinese heritage, and a political and strategic adaptation to Malay hegemony (Phang, 2000, Tan, 2000). There are no distinct religions for the Chinese schoolgirls as there are for the Malays and Indians. As Tan (2000) states, Chinese practice a hybrid of religions.

Research to date (Andaya & Andaya, 2001) has indicated that the characteristics of being hardworking and competitive are important concepts for the

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Chinese. This is illustrated when the Chinese girls I worked with refer to the hardworking and selfish girl through the notion of *kiasu* attitudes and behaviour. Being *kiasu* is important in being the top academic achievers in the form and school. Being *kiasu* is seen as a driving force for them by the top 20 Chinese girls and as contributing towards maintaining their top academic ranking.

Some of the academically successful Chinese girls indicated in their one-to-onf; interviews that being hardworking and totally focused on their studies comes from their parents. Their parents expected them to obtain high grades in their examinations. These girls also said in the individual interviews that being hardworking and competitive is part of the Chinese culture and heritage. As noted in Chapter Two, the Chinese in Malaysia have had the historical experiences of moving from the status of skilled migrant workers during British colonial times to having a significant stronghold in the economic sector in postcolonial Malaysia. They also have the history of the Confucian work ethic.

Phang (2000) and Tan (2000) have stated that one of the dimensions of Chinese identity in Malaysia is the strategic and political adaptation to Malay hegemony. The high achieving Chinese girls assumed the characteristics of the *kiasu,* in negotiating the discourse of ethnicity, the affirmative action policy that does not reward them for their high grades. They also aspired to further their studies in private colleges or overseas as they were aware of an ethnic quota system for university entrance. They highlighted the ethnic bias in the education system. The academically successful Chinese girls construct their ways of being Chinese

schoolgirls in relation to the Malays, through their negotiation with the affirmative action policy.

As noted in Chapters Five and Six, I suggest that there is a 'Chineseness' in this school culture due to the top students, school leaders and majority of the teachers being Chinese. Furthermore, about half of the students in this school are Chinese. I suggest that a form of 'Chineseness' is present in the school practices, especially in the ethos of academic excellence, competitiveness and hard work. This is also reiterated in the Chinese girls' notion of the 'traditional' Chinese girl. The image of a top academic achiever in this school assumes the identity of the Chinese girl. Chinese girls occupied the top 26 academic positions in this form with the exception of one Malay girl who was ranked the third in the form. Furthermore, as indicated in Chapter Five, the majority of the Chinese students are in the high achieving classes and the majority of the Malay girls, in the low achieving classes. The uneven ethnic distribution in the Form Four classes was highlighted by this group of Chinese schoolgirls in the individual and group interviews.

All the Chinese schoolgirls in this research assumed varying degrees of the 'Western' preferences for trendy dress styles, interaction with boys and were fluent in English. It was the top achieving Chinese girls who assumed most of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl in wearing the 'spaghetti straps' confidently, going to cafes on weekends, being fluent in English and having interactions with boys.

In the free-formant essays, and their individual and group interviews, the top achieving Chinese girls and their peers have described a high achiever to be one who

is highly competitive, selfish, hardworking and materialistic. The top achieving Chinese girls are both 'Western' and 'traditional' in being *kiasu*. The more 'Western' and *kiasu* 'traditional' Chinese schoolgirl she was, the more successful she was in terms of academic performance, leadership opportunities and future educational opportunities. The academically successful Chinese schoolgirl, especially the top achievers, also exhibited some rebellious behaviour in the school by being rude and challenging teachers. They were rebellious yet conforming, since they were attentive in class and adhered to school rules. The academically unsuccessful Chinese girls were more 'Western' and had freedom in dressing and interactions with boys. This group of girls did not assume any of the *kiasu* attitudes and behaviours that the top achieving Chinese girls did. They also exhibited rebellious behaviour in school in being rude to teachers, inattentive in class, and in breaking school rules.

There are multiple and contradictory ways of being Chinese schoolgirls as these girls negotiate the discourses of gender and ethnicity, and discourses of schooling. What was common to all, as noted earlier on in this section, was all of them assumed some of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl but to varying degrees. Ways of being Chinese schoolgirls are clearly complex and intricate.

In the following chapter, I present ways of being Indian schoolgirls.

Chapter Eight

Ways of being Indian schoolgirls

8.1 Introduction

Ways of being Indiaii sdsoolgirls among this group of nine Indian girls are discussed in this chapter. As with the Malay and Chinese schoolgirls, the Indian girls are clustered into academically successful and academically unsuccessful groups based on the stream and class they are in, and their academic ranking in the form. Differences in ways of being Indian schoolgirls are presented as these girls negotiate discourses on gender and ethnicity, and discourses of schooling. This group of Indian girls' understandings of the 'traditional' Indian girl are also discussed. I draw on these girls' individual and group interviews, their free-format essays, electronic communication, my observations in and out of the school and my informal discussions with the teachers to understand the discourses with which these Indian girls engage.

8.2 The nine Indian girls

The notion of an Indian schoolgirl is presented within the framework of identity and difference. Nine Indian Form Four schoolgirls were involved in this research, two from the top achieving class, three from Arts B and three from Arts C. Seven girls are Hindus and two girls, Catholics. These girls constructed their gender identity in relation to markers including being obedient to their parents, restricted interactions with boys, restricted freedom in going out on their own and the use of dressing styles which do not expose too much of the body.

8.3 The Indian schoolgirls' essentialised notion of a 'traditional' Indian girl

This group of Indian girls described critical discourses they identified as relating to the 'traditional' Indian girl. For them, the 'traditional' Indian girl referred to the Indian girls' description of a 'typical' or 'old-fashioned' or 'good' Indian girl, as one with long hair, who wears the *pottu,* dresses decently and does not wear revealing clothes. She would also be obedient to her parents, have no boyfriend, take care of her honour and her family's honour in being cautious with her interactions with boys, and keep to Indian traditions and customs. During group and/or individual interviews, these Indian girls stated that they learnt about how to be a 'traditional' Indian girl from their mothers and grandmothers. They commented that their mothers passed on knowledge about customs, traditions and religious practices to their daughters. Some of the Indian girls in their individual interviews described the notion of the conservative and old-fashioned Indian girl as one who did not go out and did not wear 'spaghetti straps'.

8.3.1 *Pottu*

The *pottu* is the dot that Indian females wear on the middle of their forehead. All the Indian girls in this research said in the individual interview that the *pottu* is used as an ethnic marker for Indian females. They also said that the *pottu* is used as a religious marker and protection for Hindus. The following comments are illustrative of this:

> If I do not wear the *pottu,* people will say that I am an Indian-Muslim (Revathi of 4 Arts B).

> *The pottu* is a protection from bad spirits...my mother said the *pottu* is a common sign as an Indian girl...it is a sin not to wear \h& *pottu* (Bhavani of 4 Arts B).

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Most of these Indian girls said in the individual interview that it is part of the Indian culture and tradition for an Indian girl to do wear the *pottu*. Some of the Indian girls told me that the colour of *the pottu* is used to differentiate whether an Indian woman is single, married or a widow. Most of the Indian girls said that the habit of wearing the *pottu* had betn with them since young when their mother would put on the *pottu* for them.

8.3.2 Long hair

Most of the Indian girls said in the individual interviews that a girl should have long hair. Some of them said that their mothers expected them to have long hair. For example, Rathi of 4 Arts C stated,

> Girls should have long hair and long hair is beautiful...short hair looks like
> a guy.. .my mother will scold me if I cut my long hair (Rathi of 4 Arts C). -

Nalini of 4 Science A explained the significance of the *pottu* and long hair in her email:

> We are socialized to have long hair and wear *& pottu...coz* it shows we are
> feminine (Nalini of 4 Science A).

8.3.3 Boys

There is this notion among most of the Indian girls that it is improper for an Indian girl to be seen with a boy. Some of the Indian girls indicated in their individual interviews that there was some policing among the senior members of the Indian community on the reputation of young Indian girls in relation to boy-girl interactions. This is illustrated in Nalini's email:

> Most Indians have this mentality that...ohhh the guy she talks to has to be
> her boyfriend...they are not open minded...they are so conservative like in
> the olden days...you know last time....the girls are not supposed to show
> herself and must remain in the kitchen...some parents still have that way of

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thinking...so their kids follow too...they are brought up that way (Nalini of 4 Science A).

Some of the Indian girls commented on the fact that it was inappropriate in the eyes of the Indian community for a Indian girl to be seen with a boy. The following comments are illustrative of this:

It is in an Indian's nature to comment if girls and boys speak to each other (Priya of 4 Science A).

Girls who mix a lot with guys are very social...this is not nice...it is not nice to the eyes (Bhavani of 4 Arts B).

Whenever my sister goes out and family friends see her with a guy...even before she gets home...there is a phone call telling my parents so (Nalini of 4 Science A).

8.3.4 Obedience to parents

Most of the Indian girls said in the individual interview that a 'traditional[5]' Indian girl was good, obedient, listened to her parents and sat at home. Some said in the individual interview that obedience to parents is a sign of respect to elders. Furthermore, they added that 'parents only do good things for their children'. These points are illustrated in the comments below in the one-to-one interview:

Whatever their parents say is right...the Indian thingy...where a typical Indian girl would just sit there and accept everything and say yeah, yeah and right (Nalini of 4 Science A).

You cannot argue with your parents...they are older that is (Rathi of 4 ArtsC)

8.3.5 Dressing styles

Most of the Indian girls said in the one-to-one interviews that an Indian girl should not wear revealing clothes. Some of the Indian girls said that wearing such clothes might lead to unpleasant incidents with men. Nalini and Bhavani provided examples of this point in their individual interviews.

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You don't see Indian girls with spaghetti straps (Nalini of 4 Science A).

Indian girls who wear sleeveless tops do not respect their culture...you can wear the body hug...but cover all...if guys see...they want to do something... want to take advantage...of them (Bhavani of 4 Arts B).

8.3.6 Taboos and forbidden things

Most of these Indian girls spoke about Indian customs and taboos for an Indian girl.

Examples of these customs are illustrated in the comments made by the girls in the

one-to-one interviews:

Cannot touch plants during menstruating...cannot cycle also during menstruating (Priya of 4 Science A).

I cannot pray when I am having my period...my body is dirty...I also have to stand long when praying...it is uncomfortable when having period (Bhavani of 4 Arts B).

I had a ceremony when I first got my period.. .men cannot watch or come to this ceremony.. .if they do.. .they will get pimples (Rathi of 4 Arts C).

My aunty told me that if I cut my nails at night.. .this will bring bad luck (Shanti of 4 Arts B).

Some of the girls said in the individual interviews that these customs and beliefs had

been passed down through the generations through the female elders of the family.

Priya summarised some of the girls' feelings about these customs and taboos in this

following comment she *r ₌e in the individual interview:

This cannot do, that cannot do, cannot go out, cannot enjoy (Priya of 4 Science A).

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8.4 'Western' girl

Some of the Indian girls in the individual interview described the 'Western' girl as one who wore revealing clothes such as 'spaghetti straps' and shorts, had boyfriends and touched boys. The following comment exemplifies this:

> They are like so Western.. .ahh the boyfriend and girlfriend will go and hug hug...then the dressing...so like...short and spaghetti straps...I don't like all that(Shantiof4ArtsB).

8.5 Academically successful Indian schoolgirls - Balancing between being 'traditional' Indian and 'Western' girl

There were three Indian girls in 4 Science A, the top class in the form. Two of these Indian girls volunteered to be part of my research. Nalini was academically ranked 25 out of a total 200 in the form. Priya was academically ranked 111 out of 200 in the form and ranked 41 out of 42 in her class of 4 Science A. I discuss Priya in the section on exceptions to the patternings as she is in the top class and was academically ranked low.

Nalini is the only high achieving Indian schoolgirl in this study. I draw on the comments made by both the other Indian schoolgirls in this study and Nalini to provide a description of the academically successful Indian schoolgirl who is balanced between ways of being 'traditional' Indian girl and a 'Western' girl. Most of the other Indian girls in this study referred to Nalini and her classmate, who did not volunteer for this study as the 'smart', 'clever' and 'top' Indian girls in the school. I have chosen to discuss Priya in the section that discusses girls who do not neatly fit into the academically successful and unsuccessful groups. In that section, I describe Priya, who is academically ranked low in the form and in the top

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achieving class, 4 Science A, and Bhavani who is academically ranked high in the form and in the low achieving class, 4 Arts B.

This one academically successful Indian girl assumed a few of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Indian girl and some of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl, albeit one who complies with what is considered proper for an Indian girl.

The top achieving Indian girls were perceived by other Indian girls in the research group as being clever, having a bright future, having parents who are open-minded, having some freedom in dressing and interacting with boys. These top achieving Indian girls were also perceived as not interacting with Indian girls from other classes. Nalini, the high achieving Indian girl in the individual interview said that she felt she did not conform to the image of the 'traditional' Indian girl as she had short hair, did not wear the *pottu* to school, argued and had discussions with her parents, and was not fluent in the Tamil language. She also pointed out in the interview, that unlike all the other Indian girls in the school she and her other classmate were the only Indian girls who had short hair. Nalini said that she wore shorts to the tuition classes whereas all the other Indian girls v/ore pants or skirts. All the Indian girls in school wore the *pottu* except for Nalini. Nalini said in the individual interview that her parents allowed her to go out with boys in a group but not alone. Her comments below in the one-to-one interview exemplified some of these points:

> You cannot like just sit there and just accept what they say...you cannot always agree with what they say as you have you opinions too...and my parents are used to me doing that (Nalini of 4 Science A).

Nalini illustrated her tight study and tuition schedule in her writings on her experiences of schooling.

> Life at the beginning was tough...I had so much work to do...soooo many tuitions to go to...you know my weekdays are spent going to tuitions...and on some days I have 2 tuitions to go to...and by the time you get back it is already 10.30pm and some days I didn't even have the time to read papers or watch T.V. ...but now it is different...I got used to it and manage my time differently.. .soo I have more time to do stuff.. .ha ha like the essay ©

Her ambition is to do medicine or maybe specialise in gynaecology. She aimed to do an Australian pre-university course and continue the degree program either in Australia or Ireland. She is motivated to do well in her studies to secure a bright future. This is illustrated in the following comment in the one-to-one interview.

> You still have to study and do well...if not what...you want to be a road sweeper...I mean you have goals and you have to achieve them...so you have to do well (Nalini of 4 Science A).

Like the top achieving Chinese and Malay schoolgirls, Nalini also commented on the overload of schoolwork and the unfriendly nature of the teachers.

> Teach properly...explain properly...I mean like...slowly...so that I can understand...cause then I won't need another tutor to teach me (Nalini of 4 Science A).

Nalini, the academically successful Indian schoolgirl, exhibited mostly conforming behaviour in school, was attentive in class, did her homework, was hardworking and adhered to school rules.

Nalini epitomised the modern, open-minded and smart Indian-Tamil girl. The other Indian girls saw her in this light, just as she saw herself. There are some traits in her behaviour that symbolised the 'traditional' Indian girl and the 'Western' girl, albeit one who complied with what is regarded as proper for an Indian girl. For example, her mother did not allow her to go out on her own with boys but was

allowed in groups. She was not allowed to wear shorts except to tuition classes. She wore 'spaghetti straps' under a cardigan and she did not like to wear sleeveless tops.

8.6 Academically unsuccessful Indian schoolgirls

8.6.1 More 'Western' than 'traditional'

There were three girls in this group and they were from Arts B, one of the low achieving classes in Form Four. They were academically ranked 131, 156 and 162 out of a total 200 in the form. All of them assumed a few of the 'traditional' Indian girl's characteristics and some of those of the 'Western' girl.

All these girls said in the one-to-one interview that they had boyfriends. They went out frequently with their friends or boyfriends. All of these girls said that they lied to their parents in that they had boyfriends against their parents' wishes and went out with them often. The following comments in the individual interviews exemplified this point:

> I tell my parents I am going on a class picnic...but I go out with my guy friends instead (Revathi of 4 Arts B).

> I have a 19 year old boyfriend...he is working...I lie to my parents...I say I am going out with friends.. .but I go out with him (Shanti of 4 Arts B).

Most of the girls in the individual interview said that they found schooling boring and tough. This is represented in the comments below

> It started with many new and tougher subjects...I did well in the lower form...but later on I became bored and lazy...I hate school and studies (Shanti of 4 Arts B).

> Studies...the topic I hate most...this is the worst year ever...last time things used to be fun and so nice...form 1...form 2...form 3...Form Four...everything like so complicated...have to study so much and I want to always go out.. .and I can't (Sharmala of 4 Arts B).

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> Pass means enough for me...cause now must enjoy life (Revathi of 4 Arts B).

These girls said that they did not have much self-discipline in their studies. They also said that they would catch up on their studies in the following year, it being the year of the major examination, *SPM*. The comments below highlighted this:

> I must work harder next year...I really regret for all what I have done...I must really prove it to my beloved papa (Shanti of 4 Arts B).

> Why can't I study harder? At times I will be so lazy...I will have so much homework...I will just be staring at the book and sleeping...at times I really really want to study but I cannot...I just don't know why...I cannot concentrate...I will be looking at the book...and then all of a sudden I will be in dreamland...the teacher turns only...I will be sleeping on the table...cannot concentrate (Sharmala of 4 Arts B).

> If I have the mood...I will study and do all my work...then no mood...I won't study (Revathi of 4 Arts B).

Only one girl in this group went for tuition classes. Sharmala said in the one-to-one interview that she went for Mathematics and Accounts but missed her classes often as she visited sick relatives who lived in another state. This group of academically unsuccessful Indian schoolgirls said in the individual interview that they understood the importance of schooling to their future, however, as noted earlier they found schooling tough and boring. The importance of schooling is demonstrated in the comments below:

> For your future lah...to be a better person...like you won't suffer...live a poor life...they teach you so much...study...study...like you will achieve so much.. .and to be more confident by mixing around (Shanti of 4 Arts B).

> After SPM.. .depends on which career you are taking.. .say like.. .you get good grades...you will go to a good college...or you go straight to a university ...or you go to Form 6...if not...depends...some of them want to get married after SPM...if you don't do well...you sit for it again (Sharmala of 4 Arts B).

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All these Indian girls complained about the teachers in the individual interviews. They expected the teachers to care of them and do more than just the teaching. The following comments illustrated this:

> Teaching...ask the teachers to pay attention individually...sometimes the teachers won't check the homework. ..they don't care (Shanti of 4 Arts B).

Shanti aimed to do a course in Hotel Management in Singapore, Sharmala aimed to go to a private college to do law and Revathi aimed to be an air-stewardess.

Of all the Indian schoolgirls in this study, these girls were the most rebellious. They collected demerit points *in.* breaking the school rules, did not complete their homework and were noisy in class. They received a B grade for their school behaviour.

8.6.2 'Traditional' Indian schoolgirls

There were three girls in this group and they were from 4 Arts C, the low achieving class in Form Four. They were academically ranked approximately between 180 and 190 out of 200 in the form. This was based on my calculation, as only one of the girls knew her academic ranking. She was academically ranked 23 in the class and 187 in the form. The other two Indian girls were academically ranked 20 and 22 in the class. By logical deduction, their academic ranking in the form would be approximately between 180 and 190. All of them assumed most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Indian girl. They had long hair, and wore the *pottu* to school. They were obedient to parents and had limited social interaction with boys. Interacting with boys was linked with to the notion of honour, of the girl and her family. Some of these points were illustrated in the comments they made in the one-to-one interview below

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> My parent's good name will be spoilt if I go out with guys...I will not fall in love to take care of my family's good name...I want my mother to choose my husband for me...I hope I get a husband who give me some freedom (Punitha of 4 Arts C).

> Like honour...if you have a boyfriend...they will want our thing...they might like our bodies and all that (Rathi of 4 Arts C).

This group of Indian girls also said in their interviews that they hardly went out on their own or with friends. They usually went out with their family. These girls said that they wore jeans and tight tops but not revealing clothes. Rathi commented on this in the individual interview:

> My father will get angry if I wear short blouses...short skirts...if the body is too exposed...the guys will see our body...and some of them have negative thinking...they want to touch us and want us and think of having sex (Rathi of 4 Arts C).

Based on my interviews and observations in the school, I judged that these girls were very fluent in the Tamil language but not as fluent in English and Malay. They were also quiet and attentive in class. They girls also said that they were not very active in co-curricular activities. These three Indian girls said that they would be going for tuition classes the following year for Mathematics, Science and the languages, it being the year of the important examination. They claimed in the individual interviews that they had difficulty in understanding some of the subjects in school. They were afraid of asking the teachers because they thought that the teachers would scold them. They added that some times they did ask some teachers questions but they became more confused. Rathi commented on the difficulty of understanding Mathematics, representing the opinion of the other two girls on many of their studies.

> Maths is difficult...too many topics...and the concepts are difficult...I only understand very little of what the teacher teaches...and if I ask the teacher questions...the more I don't understand (Rathi of 4 Arts C).

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These girls said that they attended school to study the subjects, but as noted earlier in this section, they found it hard to understand most of the subjects. They said in the one-to-one interviews that they were happy coming to school because it provided them an opportunity to interact with their friends. The following comments are illustrative of these points:

I come to school to learn all the subjects in school (Rathi of 4 Arts C).

I come to school to study...because my mother send me to school (Sumita of 4 Arts C).

Rathi aimed to do medicine in India or be a nurse. Sumita wanted to pursue law in a private college. Punitha said that she might work as a hotel clerk like her father.

This group of academically unsuccessful Indian girls exhibited most of the conforming school behaviour in being quiet, attentive in class and adhering to school rules. They exhibited some aspects of the rebellious behaviour in school, particularly in not completing their homework.

8.7 Exceptions to the patternings

In this section, I discuss two Indian girls who did not fit into the criteria of academically successful and unsuccessful. Priya was in the top achieving class but she was academically ranked low, 111 out of 200 in the form. She was the second last girl in the class and was going down to 5 Science B the following year. She assumed most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Indian girl. She commented in the individual interview on the restrictions imposed by her parents on her behaviour in dressing styles, social interactions with boys and Indian customs. She exemplified this point in her comment.

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> I feel very confined...like no freedom...like very long horrible feeling
> (Priya of 4 Science A).

Priya in the one-to-one interview compared herself to Nalini, who went out with friends shopping and watched movies, went for parties and went out with boys in groups. She also described her parents as 'old-fashioned', as indicated in the statement below.

> My parents are like typical Indians...like in the old days...the old Indians
> who cannot do everything...and maintain traditions...like...Indian girls
> cannot go out (Priya of 4 Science A).

Priya was the only Indian school prefect in Form Four. She spoke fluent English, Malay and Tamil. She was also acting Deputy Head Prefect towards the end of the fieldwork. She exhibited mainly conforming school behaviours as she adhered to school rules, was respectful to teachers and did her schoolwork. I saw her sleeping in the class a few times during my classroom observations. Her comments in the one-to-one interview indicated that she saw herself as a weak student:

> Yeah...I am changing class...I am going to 5 Science B...I am dead...I
> don't know what to do...cannot ask the teacher to give me back my
> class..,because I did so badly...so live with it for year...don't know
> lah...feel embarrassed (Priya of 4 Science A).

She went for Malay tuition class and said she would be taking tuition for the other subjects in the following year. She said in the one-to-one interview that she enjoyed all the school subjects but she was just lazy to study, as indicated below.

> I •. . "t study...at home also very lazy...parents shout shout...as
> usual...never study (Priya of 4 Science A).

She said in the one-to-one interview that she enjoyed all the school subjects but she was just lazy to study. She aimed to do medicine in a private university in Malaysia. In summary, Priya, assumed most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Indian

girl and a few of the characteristics of the 'Western' girls, and exhibited mainly conforming school behaviours.

Bhavani was in a low achieving class, 4 Arts B but her academic ranking was high. She was academically ranked 46 out of 200 in the form and 1 out of 31 in her class. She assumed most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Indian girl and very few of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl. She said in the one-to-one interview that she listened to what her parents said and only went out with her family. She said that she did not have a boyfriend because she wanted to concentrate on her studies. Bhavani also said that she followed the traditions of Indians. For example, she did not pray when menstruating. She wore *thepottu* and had long hair. She said in the individual interview that Indian girls could wear tight but not revealing clothes. Based on the interviews and observations, I judged her to be fluent in Malay and Tamil but not so fluent in English. She exhibited conforming behaviour in school. She was the class monitor. She told me in the individual interview that her classmates did not tolerate her as she informed ihe teachers when they broke the school rules. She said that the school was well-known for its good academic results and experienced teachers. She aimed to enter a public university and pursue a teaching degree. Her motivation for her studies was illustrated in the comment below:

> I really want to study...I want to try hard...and I want to achieve something...! have the spirit (Bhavani of 4 Arts B).

8.8 Ways of being Indian schoolgirls in relation to Malay and Chinese schoolgirls

Ways of being and knowing are also constructed in relation to others within a specific context. Some of these Indian girls in constructing their identity in relation to the Chinese and Malay girls said that Chinese girls had more freedom and were calculative in comparison to Indian and Malay girls. Malay girls were seen as being more friendly and open in comparison to the Chinese. The following comments indicated this:

> Chinese girls are normally very open...they don't bother much...they wear fashion clothes.. .they can go out with friends and are very open-minded.. .if I go out with a guy friend.. .people will gossip.. .Malay girls are okay (Priya of 4 Science A).

> Like Chinese girls when they want to find friend means they will see standards like how she behaves...whereas Malay girls can mix with anyone, they will allow anyone to be their friends...they will follow anything...easily influenced (Revathi of 4 Arts B).

> Never trust a Chinese...they are self-centred...but there are some nice ones (Nalini of 4 Science A).

> Chinese and Malay girls go out...Indian girls don't go out...Chinese and Malays wear clothes...short here...short at the back...short blouses...short skirts...Indians don't (Rathi of 4 Arts C).

Some of the Indian girls also in the individual (interview commented on the 'Chineseness' of the school. This is illustrated in the comments below:

> Chinese...let us say you do wrong like her...you will get scolding and not her...cause she is a Chinese...she has done the same wrong...but you will get the scolding (Priya of 4 Science A).

> You see most of the prefects in Form Four are Chinese...one is only Indian.. .Priya.. .they all like to suck up to people (Bhavani of 4 Arts B).

> The top scorers are Chinese...they study very hard...they want to get a good job (Priya of 4 Science A).

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8.9 Competing discourses: the discursive influences on ways of being Indian schoolgirls

Oorjitham (1997) in her research on Indian families in the plantation and urban sector in Malaysia found that mothers assumed the traditional role as religious heads in the family. She adds that within these Indian families, legitimate authority is bestowed on women on the home front and men in the external world. The Indian family structure as practiced by most Indian families in Malaysia originated from rural South India where agriculture was the main economic activity (Andaya &Andaya, 2001; Muzaffar, 1993; Oorjitham, 1997). The agrarian society is patriarchal and patrilineal. In addition, the Hindu religion, which is professed by most Malaysian Indians, emphasises male authority (Oorjitham, 1997). However, Oorjitham (1997) argues that with a higher level of education and more Indians acquiring an independent source of income, the prevailing male dominance in Indian families might change.

This group of Indian girls described the 'traditional' Indian girl, in which the role of an Indian woman is submissive, timid and confined to the household, as prescribed historically by the Indian community. These girls' understanding of the 'traditional' Indian girl is one who wears the *pottu*, has long hair, is good, obedient to her parents, does not go out, has no boyfriend, takes care of her family's name and image and her honor, does not wear revealing clothes and keeps to traditions and customs. Indian femininity is prescribed mainly through their mothers and grandmothers; these girls said in the interviews that their understandings of what it is to be a 'traditional' Indian girl came from their mothers and grandmothers. Like

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the Malay girls, Indian girls are responsible for controlling the sexual behaviour of men through their dressing and behaviour.

This group of Indian girls also negotiated discourses of schooling, in addition tv \MC discourse of Indian femimiiiiy that is linked to the patriarchal nature of the Indian family and ethnic &· Vstivity. Indian schoolgirls in this school were mainly average achieving students as seen in the ethnic distribution of schoolgirls in Form Four in Table 5.6 in Chapter Five. Some of tiiese girls also commented on the 'Chineseness' of the school with Chinese girls holding leadership positions and the top academic positions. Additionally, they commented on some of the teachers who displayed signs of favouritism to Chinese girls.

In this study, the Indian girls who assumed fewer of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Indian girl and more of the 'Western' girl, and exhibited conforming behaviour in the school were the academically successful girls. The more 'traditional' an Indian girl is, the less successful she was academically. There was an exception to this, Bhavani, who assumed most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Indian girl, exhibited conforming school behaviour and was academically successful.

There are two ways of being academically unsuccessful Indian schoolgirls. There are those who assumed most of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl and few of the 'traditional' Indian girl. They also exhibited rebellious behaviour in school in being 'naughty', 'noisy', 'lazy', not doing their homework, and breaking school rules. The other group of academically unsuccessful Indian schoolgirls

assumed most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Indian girl and a few of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl.

A few of the Indian girls spoke of the affirmative action policy in the individual interviews. They spoke of the ethnic bias in this policy stating that the Malay girls have a easier route into public universities. However, I did not address questions on this policy to the academically unsuccessful Indian girls, as with the academically unsuccessful Malay and Indian schoolgirls. I will address this issue in the concluding chapter as I revisit the reflections on my role as a researcher in this study.

Ways of being Indian schoolgirls are multiple and contradictory, as with the Malay and Chinese schoolgirls in this study. Being an Indian schoolgirl is complex and complicated.

Chapter Nine

Ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls : gender, ethnicity, schooling and resistance

9.1 Introduction

This thesis looks at one segment of contemporary Malaysian society, focusing on the self-identifications of Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls as these are located within the politics of ethnic identification. I have provided an argument for this focus in the introductory chapter. In the last three chapters, I have provided descriptions on ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls within the conceptual framework of identity and difference. In the Malaysian education system, a student spends about 8 hours a day and 215 days a year in school. This is a significant time spent in an environment, in which students are also exposed to a range of discourses and practices related to identity; for example these students negotiate and construct their identities through both the formal and the hidden curriculum. Students then choose elements from such codes and mix them with ideas that are derived from their own background, community culture as well as the State's discourse on the Malaysian identity. In constructing their self-identifications, the students undergo processes of negotiations and contestations within the interplay of the various discourses and practices in their school and community contexts. This in turn affects their academic and non-academic behaviour within the schooling environment.

These girls are constantly juggling multiple social and personal roles. In the Malaysian context, these girls would be located within multiple subject positions as

teenage girls, as *Bumiputeras,* Malays, Chinese, Indians; as Muslims, Taoists, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians or affiliates in other religions; as daughters, as school pupils. They are also on the brink of adulthood and are exposed to multiple representations of being a woman/girl from discursive fields related to nation, the state, the ethnic collectives they belong to, and various social institutions. These girls are constantly defining and redefining their self-identification as they manoeuvre between individual experiences and the social discourses and practices of the various collectivities and institutions they encounter. Each girl creates, modifies and interprets her gender identity in a manner unique to her alone, and therefore this significant aspect of her identity is a subjective reality shifting and constantly in flux.

9.2 The discursive spaces of Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls

I have conducted this research in a single site, Parkview Girls' Secondary School. I am not suggesting that this is how Malaysia works or the world works. My reading of the discourses in which these girls engage is premised on my discussions with them in the individual and group interviews, their free-format essays on experiences of being a girl and schooling, my observations in and out of school, my informal discussions with the teachers and electronic communication with the girls. The findings of this study presented in the previous three chapters suggest that ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls are consitituted by competing discourses of gender, the politics of ethnic identification and schooling. These girls were positioned and positioned themselves within these discourses through

processes of negotiation and contestation. Thus, these positionings were not free from conflict.

This study focused on a specific school culture, where the demographics of the school, in terms of the ethnic composition of both the student and the teacher population are significant in the culture. Forms of resistance are site-specific. Each school has its own culture. The discourse in Parkview Girls' Secondary School is dominated by Chinese ethnicity. As the girls had indicated in their interviews, there was a sense of 'Chineseness' in the school ethos. The Chinese girls generally performed better academically than the Malay and Indian girls. Furthermore, the majority of the teachers, top achievers and school leaders were Chinese. In another school, such as a co-educational school, or a girls' school in a different area, there might be a different range of discourses.

These schoolgirls were negotiating discourses, be it discourses of schooling, discourses of the politics of ethnic identification and discourses of gender, that position them ethnically. At the nation-level, the Malays as an ethnic collective occupy the top-most rung of the political hierarchy, followed by the Chinese ethnic collective. Economically, the Chinese ethnic collective is in a constant process of contestation with the Malay ethnic collective. Educationally, the Chinese as an ethnic collective achieve more academically, be it in the schools, public universities (even though they are not the majority in public universities) or private colleges. However, there is Malay domination within the Government arm of the Education ministry and all its associated machineries. The other two ethnic collectivities,

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Indians and Others, do not occupy any significant position in this web of power, as argued in Chapters One and Two.

The research revealed a multiUi Je of hierarchies at play within this particular school. As argued, the school has an ethos of 'Chineseness'. The classes are placed in a hierarchy, with the Science classes comprising a majority of Chinese students and being positioned at the top of this academic hierarchy. The Malay as a collective in this school occupied the lower portion of this academic hierarchy. The Indians were somewhere in between. In relation, to ways of being girls, there is general agreement among the Malay, Indian and some of the Chinese schoolgirls, based on the individual and group interviews and free-format essays, that the Chinese girls have freedom in dietary habits, dressing styles and social interactions, and are competitive and hard-working in their studies. Chinese schoolgirls are seen as assuming more of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl and that of the *kiasu* Chinese girl. The Malay girls are seen by the Chinese and Indian girls, and a few of the Malay girls, as being restricted in their dressing styles and social interactions due to Islam, and not as competitive as Chinese schoolgirls in their studies. Malay schoolgirls, in general, are seen as assuming more of the characteristics of the 'traditional' girl and being less academically successful. Indian girls are seen as being both 'traditional' and 'Western', both academically successful and academically unsuccessful.

Layers of positionings are intermeshed within webs of power, which these girls negotiate in constructing their self-identifications. It is a complicated process, as there are the continuing processes of contestation in reference to the ethnic groups

(Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others) and the ethnic labels *(Bumiputerasftion-Bumiputeras,* Malays/non-Malays, Muslirns/non-Muslims). I use the notion of resistance to understand the complicated links between ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls, schooling and the wider Malaysian society.

I briefly recapitulate the major findings of the previous three chapters before addressing the notion of resistance in relation to ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls.

9.3 Interesting findings

The academically successful Malay and Indian schoolgirls assumed some of the characteristics of the 'traditional' girl and the 'Western' girl, and exhibited mainly conforming school behaviour. The top achieving Chinese girls assumed most of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl and were like the 'traditional' girl in being *kiasu.* The academically successful Chinese schoolgirls were the top girls in the form. They exhibited some rebellious behaviour and some conforming behaviour in school. The top achieving Chinese girls were seen by others, as being the top students in the form, as well as the most *kiasu* and most 'Western' girl.

There was a group of academically successful Chinese and Indian schoolgirls, who assumed several characteristics of both the 'traditional' and 'Western' girl. They exhibited mainly conforming behaviours in school.

There were two groups of academically unsuccessful girls. One consisted of academically unsuccessful Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls who assumed more characteristics of the 'Western' girl than of the 'traditional' girl. They all

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exhibited rebellious behaviour in school. They were the most rebellious of all the groups of girls. The other group, Malay and Indian academically unsuccessful schoolgirls assumed most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' girl and exhibited more conforming than rebellious behaviour in school. This group of academically unsuccessful and 'traditional' Malay and Indian schoolgirls were some of the lowest achieving girls in the form.

Three girls did not fall into these groups. There was the 'traditional' Indian schoolgirl from the lowly ranked Arts stream class, 4 Arts B, who was academically ranked high in the form. Two girls, one Indian and one Malay girl from the top class, 4 Science A, were academically ranked low in the form. As stated earlier, any system that attempts to classify has contradictions.

9.4 Resistance

On looking through the empirical data, I was fascinated by the element of what I took to be resistance. As discussed in Chapter Three on the theoretical framings of this study, Giroux (1983) outlined the notion of resistance as a useful analytical tool in understanding the relationship between school and the wider society. The notion of resistance adopted in this study is linked to the notion of oppression and emancipation. Giroux argues that traditionally the notion of resistance was embedded within the "theoretical terrains of fiinctionalism and mainstream educational psychology" (Giroux, 1983 p. 107). He argues for a notion of resistance that is linked to processes of domination and oppression.

> Resistance in this case redefines the causes and meaning of oppositional behaviour by arguing that it has little to do with the logic of deviance, individual pathology, learned helplessness (and, of course, genetic

> explanations), and a great deal to do, though not exhaustively, with the
> logic of moral and political indignation (Giroux, 1983 p. 107).

Thus, central to this notion of resistance are the consciously held notions of domination and oppression. As argued in Chapter Three, this notion of resistance is compatible with feminisms, in unpacking the webs of power in ways of being and knowing as women/girls. Additionally, the notion of discourse is used as an analytical tool to understand the notion of resistance, as webs of power are entrenched in discourses. I found this notion of resistance a useful mechanism for understanding the girls.

The notion of resistance as adopted in this study, emphasises social differences in addition to the traditional class-based motives and contends that there are the emancipatory goals in resistance behaviour of students. Resistance is seen as students' response to their social world, the larger social world of gender inequality (linked to the politics of ethnic identification) and the micro-social world of schooling.

Giroux (1983) cautions us, stating that not all oppositional behaviour should be defined as resistance. Oppositional behaviour must have sociopolitical significance to be defined as resistance. When students refuse to adhere to school rules and routines, and refuse to accept the school ethos, which they perceive as means of subordination, they are engaging in acts of resistance (Solomon, 1992). The notion of resistance that I have adopted in the study is one that has emancipatory effects and sociopolitical significance (Giroux, 1983), as opposed to a romanticisation of resistance (Walker, 1986, 1993).

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In this conceptualisation of resistance, the importance of the context and the discourses that individuals negotiate is emphasized. In Malaysia, as noted in Chapters One and Two, the dominant discourse in ways of being and knowing is the discourse of ethnicity, the politics of ethnic identification. The state apparatus is more explicit in relation to the discourses of ethnicity than to discourses of gender. Ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian women/girls are interpreted and enacted via discourses of ethnicity in Malaysia. The state privileges a discourse on ethnicity and the ethnic collectivities privilege a discourse on gender through ethnicity. As noted in Chapter Three, on the theoretical framings of this research, discourses are contested and are responsive.

9.5 Resisting the discourse of the politics of ethnic identification

The politics of difference as manifested through the politics of ethnic identification within all the state's machineries have resulted in social, political and economic hierarchies. Generally, the Indians and Others, as ethnic collectivities occupy the lower rung of these hierarchies. As argued in Chapter Two on contemporary Malaysia, the Malay and Chinese ethnic collectivities occupy the top rungs of the social and political, and social and economic hierarchies respectively. However, there are always exceptions when it comes to individuals. What is interesting about the school of this study, is that the school ethos has a climate of 'Chineseness', as argued for in Chapter Five. The schoolgirls involved in this study also indicated this in the individual interviews, when they spoke of girls from their own ethnic group in relation to girls from the other two ethnic groups. Within the school, there existed a

hierarchy as well, in terms of academic excellence and leadership, with the Chinese schoolgirls as a collective occupying the top rungs, the Malays the lower nm', :^-*Xh* the Indians in-between. Furthermore, the majority of the school teachers were Chinese.

Thus, the schoolgirls in this study negotiate with the 'Chineseness' in the school ethos as well as the politics of ethnic identification, which privileges the Malays in terms of the ethnic quota system and scholarships.

The top achieving Chinese girls are the best resistors and the most strategic in terms of resistance to the politics of ethnic identification. They were fully aware that they would not be rewarded for their hard work, competitiveness and academic excellence. Yet they still had academic excellence as the priority in their lives. They were resistant to the affirmative action policy that rewards only the *Bumiputeras* in terms of the public universities' ethnic quota and scholarships for further studies. In ensuring they obtained high grades through the notion of *Masu,* they had better opportunities at education in the private education sector and even at overseas scholarships. The emancipatory efttfest of their resistance was evident. Their resistance was one with sociopolitical effects in that they strategically resisted the disadvantageous (for their ethnic group) effects of the politics of ethnic identification in the education system which tends to fevour the ethnic majority of the Malays. The academically successful Chinese schoolgirls v/ho assumed some of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl and a few of the kiasu attitudes were also resisting the politics of ethnio identification but to a lesser degree.

The academically unsuccessful Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls are rf distant to the 'Chineseness' in the school ethos. The dominance of 'Chineseness' in the school ethos is another version of the politics of ethnic identification within the schooling environment, where the roles of the Malays and Chinese are reversed in relation to the state's politics of ethnic identification. These academically unsuccessful schoolgirls do not take on the spirit of hard work and *kiasu* attitudes in being selfish, competitive and afraid to lose in the schooling environment with the goal of obtaining high grades.

9.6 Resisting **the discourse of gender**

Women, the state and ethnic processes are intertwined (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989). The relationship between ethnic collectivities and the state is complicated and varies in different social and historical contexts. Women are constituted through the state but also sometimes actively engaged in countering state and ethnic processes. In addition, they are engaged in the discourses of gender for each ethnic collective.

Ways of being Malay girls are inextricably linked to Islam through markers such as the *tudung, aurat,* praying, fasting, Koran and social interactions with boys. Ways of being Indian girls are inextricably intertwined with markers, namely the *pottu,* long hair, clothes that are non-revealing, social interactions with boys, and Indian traditions and customs specifically for Indian females. There seems to be a significant policing of women/girls' bodies and behaviour for the Malays and Indians girls in comparision with the Chinese girls. Yuval-Davis (1994, 1997)

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argues that women's bodies become boundary keepers for ethnic collectives. For example, based on what this group of Malay and Indian schoolgirls have said in the individual and group interviews, interaction with boys, whether they allow boys to touch them or not determines whether they are 'traditional' or 'Western' girls. Whether they cover up their bodies or not, also determines whether they are 'traditional' or 'Western' girls.

Yuval-Davis (1994, 1997) asserts that women in their 'proper' behaviour, their 'proper' clothing embody the line which signifies the ethnic collectivity's boundaries. Gender, ethnic, religious and other differences play vital roles in the construction of specific ethnic projects. There are competitive struggles for dominant positions.

For the 'traditional' academically unsuccessful Malay schoolgirls, the state has been successful in their ethnic project through discourses of gender. This group of Malay girls resisted the notion of the 'Western' girl and accepted most ways of being 'traditional' Malay and Muslim girls. They spoke of the notion of 'honour', that of themselves as girls and their families, and in 'upholding the image of Islam'. The state and the Malay collective use the embodiement of Malay and Muslim women through the *tudung, aurat* and limited social interactions as a means of maintaining the visible marker of the ethnic dominance of the Malays. The essentialised notion of the 'traditional' Malay and Muslim girl is contrasted to that of the 'Western' girl that is assumed by the Chinese girls.

The Indian collective, a relatively non-significant collective in the economic, social and educational spheres in contemporary Malaysia, seem to use the discourses

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of gender via ethnicity to maintain its visibility within the Malaysian society. Markers such as the *pottu*, long hair, non-revealing clothes and limited social interaction with boys are seen as significant by the community in ways of being women/girls. The 'traditional' academically unsuccessful Indian schoolgirls also resisted the notion of the 'Western'girl and reiterated that the 'traditional' Indian girl should maintain the 'honour' of herself and the family.

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) argue that ethnic processes are often implicated in the pursuit of diverse political ends. Discourses of gender through ethnic, religious and other markers, are exploited by the Malay ethnic collective to ensure their political dominance, and by the Indian ethnic collective to gain some visibility to counter their non-significant social positions. Ethnic projects mobilize all their resources, in this case, women/girls, to achieve their aims (Yuval-Davis, 1994, 1997).

There were some academically unsuccessful Malay and Indian schoolgirls, who resisted the 'traditional' Malay and Indian girl respectively, in assuming most of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl. Some of these Malay schoolgirls claimed that 'it is my body', 'I can have boyfriends' as long as they did not exceed the limit of Islamic rules. They have interpreted the limits of Islam within the notion of honour, that as long as their honour as a girl was not compromised, they could behave in these ways. Theirs was a partial resistance. They were resisting their ethnic collectivities' political strategies, which use women's bodies through the notion of the 'traditional' women with proper behaviour and dressing styles to act as boundary keepers for their ethnic collectivities. Their resistance had a sociopolitical

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significance. They were resisting the patriarchal notion of the 'traditional' girl to a certain degree as theirs was only a partial resistance. The academically successful Malay and Indian schoolgirls who assumed some of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl and some of the 'traditional' girl were also resisting the discourse of gender but to a lesser degree.

In general, most of the Malay girls, both academically successful and academically unsuccessful girls, tended to assume at least a few of the characteristics of the 'traditional' M*?lay girl. There are advantages in constructing oneself as Malay in a social and political system where the affirmative action policy privileges the ethnic Malay identity.

9.7 Resist lag *the* discourse of schooling

Critical educational theorists (Giroux, 1993, 1997; McLaren, 1998) and feminist educationists (Luke & Gore, 1992; Tsolidis, 2001) have argued that school life is a cultural terrain characterised by varying degrees of contestation and resistance.

There is a body of literature that comes out of Britain which has tended to focus on the class factor (Griffin, 1985; McRobbie, 1978, 2000; Walkerdine, 1990) and ignore other social dimensions such as ethnicity. This is understandable as the British society and the Australian society to a certain extent function on the class premise. Most of these studies that come out of England (Griffin, 1985; McRobbie, 1978, 2000; Walkerdine, 1990; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 200!) and some out of Australia (Kenway & Willis, 1997; Matthews, 19P6; Wyn, 2000) found that it is social class that divides girls and young women in terms of their educational

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attainement and life trajectories (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). Schoolgirls from middle-class families were 'brainy', successful and feminine. Educational success is about middle and upper class girls. Working class girls are sexualized and delinquent.

There is another body of literature which examines ethnic minority girls in schools in the British, Australian and American context. Most research on the intertwining of femininity, ethnicity and schooling examine ethnic minority schoolgirls in mainstream Western societies (for example British studies such as Basit, 1997; Brah and Minhas, 1985; Fuller, 1980; Haw, 1998; Mirza, 1992, 1997; Australian studies such as Matthews, 2002; Tsolidis, 2000; American studies such as Fordham, 1996; Henry, 1998; Proweller, 1998; Weiler, 2000).

There is a lack of studies interrogating the intra- and inter-ethnic dynamics in ways of knowing and being women/girlr. in a non-Eurocentric context. As argued in Chapter 1, there is a need for research *on* girls and schooling within non-mainstream Western contexts as such research will continue and extend important work that theorises identity and difference in relation to gender, ethnicity and schooling. There are very few feminist studies that examine self-identifications of girls in non-Western contexts. Thus, I turn to studies that examine self-identifications of ethnic minority schoolgirls in relation to ethnicity in mainstream Western societies that adopted a feminist of difference framework for my review of relevant literature to the thesis. In particular, I am interested to examine research on Asian schoolgirls in relation to the notion of ethnicity and resistance because of the construction of Malaysian as Asian.

Some studies have examined Asian schoolgirls (Basit, 1997; Haw, 1998) and Black schoolgirls (Mirza, 1992) within the British context. Shain (2000) argues that most of the research on Asian girls in England tended to focus on specific sub-groups especially Muslim girls. She further adds that by focusing on specific subgroups, these works do not explore the commonalities and divisions existing within and across the category of young Asian women. These studies do not interrogate the intra- and inter-ethnic dynamics in ways of being an Asian within a particular site.

However, as stated earlier, this study links ways of being schoolgirls to ethnicity. It looks at the intra- and inter-ethnic dynamics in ways of being schoolgirls in relation to the three major ethnic groups in contemporary Malaysia; Malays, Chinese and Indians. Tsolidis (2000) in her work on ethnic minority secondary students in Australia found that the students set up the dichotomy of academically successful student and socially successful student. Academically successful students were seen as "nerds, gags and geeks" whereas socially successful students were seen as fashionable and cool. A lack of sense of humour, lack of friends, not wishing to get involved with boyfriends and being "daggy" were associated with academic success. Having a preference to go out have fun and being fashionable were associated with underachieving academically. Literature on schooling (for example Mac An Ghail, 1994; Matthews, 2002) indicates that academic achievement tends to be associated with being attentive, working hard, high motivation, having limited social activities and deference for the teachers and school authority. Getting low grades is normally associated with rejecting school

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rules and regulations, being rude to teachers, having an active social life that includes many boyfriends, being lazy and challenging teacher authority. Academic achievement is usually associated with conformity and collusion with the status quo (Griffin, 1993). In general, the literature on schoolgirls indicated that the pursuit of femininity through fashion, appearances and boys tends to be associated with a decline of interest in academic work. Academic success is associated with being studious and moral in demeanour.

The high achieving Chinese girls were positively inclined towards schooling but they also exhibited resistance behaviour. They understood how important it was for them to succeed in school. These top achieving Chinese girls were resistant to some aspects of school culture in that they had attitudes of confronting teachers. The discourses of schooling suppressed the student's voice. Some of the girls said that they were not given avenues to voice their opinion. They also said that they could not have discussions with the teachers. Thus, they challenge and confront the teachers. This form of resistance does not impinge upon their academic achievement. As seen in the individual and group interviews with these Chinese girls in Chapter Seven, they do not have much respect for the school system. They were resisting schooling but also succeeding academically. The academically successful Chinese schoolgirls who assumed some of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl and a few of the 'traditional' girl were also resisting the discourse of schooling but to a lesser degree.

This finding differs from studies in the literature on resistance and school (McRobbie, 1978; Griffin, 1985; Willis, 1977), mainly from England and Australia

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where it is the academically unsuccessful girls who do not see the relevance of schooling to their lives and thus exhibited resistance to school through truancy or by dropping out.

The group of academically unsuccessful Malay, Chinese and Indian girls resisted the discourses of schooling both actively and passively. In general, the academically unsuccessful schoolgirls in this project found school meaningless. They understood the relevance of schooling to their future. But unlike the academically successful Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls, especially the Chinese girls, they saw their current poor academic achievement as being due to their lack of academic abilities in the subjects that were valued in education system. The schooling and education system only values particular forms of knowledge. There was a privileging of Science over the Arts. The ranking system had already positioned them as low achievers. These low achieving Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls were positioned by both their peers and teachers, as academically unsuccessful schoolgirls. We construct our self-identification in relation to how others position us. One group of academically unsuccessful and more 'Western' than 'traditional' Malay, Indian and Chinese schoolgirls exhibited active resistance to the discourse of schooling in resisting conforming behaviour by being rude to the teachers and generally exhibiting rebellious behaviour in school. This made them visible within the schooling space. They were engaging in acts of resistance as they see the school as an institutional practice that rewards academic excellence and conforming behaviour in school. They were unable to achieve academically and therefore did not have a place in the top rungs of the academic hierarchy in school.

There was also a group of academically unsuccessful Malay and Indian schoolgirls who were passive resistors. These 'traditional' Indian and Malay girls are resisting school because their passivity was not what was required to get them through school. The discourse of schooling marginalised the kinds of skills and abilities they had, that is those that are non-Science based.

The academically successful Malay girls also resisted schooling in that they were not as competitive and hard working as the Chinese girls, as they were aware of the special educational privileges accorded to them through the affirmative action policy.

An individualized, competitive assessment system shapes learning as the individual appropriation of reproducible items of knowledge and the individual cultivation of skills (Connell, 1993). Such a conception of learning produces the belief of the unequal educational merit of individual students. Students' appropriation of knowledges and cultivation of skills proceeds at different paces and along different paths for a variety of reasons. Connell states,

> Competitive assessment produces a particular interpretation of this fact, as a sign of unequal merit - or intelligence, learning capacity, talent, dillegence, educability, achievement (Connell, 1993 p.32).

Connell (1993) argues that assessment practices are never technical devices that are socially neutral and have social consequences. He posits that social inequalities are generated in a number of educational processes: the determination of curriculum, selection and streaming, the creation and award of credentials and the legitimation of hierarchy by creating ideologies of educational merit. Educational assessment is deeply involved in the process. The system of assessment is connected with the society's central structures of power; and it functions to maintain the social

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power and prestige of dominant groups. Connell (1993) remarks that there are other assessment systems in the schools but they are subordinated or marginalised in concrete ways. Knowledge and skills are arranged hierarchically.

Connell states that if a curriculum is organised as the individual appropriation of hierarchically organised abstract knowledge, measured by competitive individual assessment, then that curriculum will reliably produce social divisions, hi the Malaysian context, I would argue based on the empirical data, existing literature on postcolonial Malaysia and my own lived experiences, that the schooling and education system results in ethnic division. Within this particular site, Parkview Girls' Secondary School, there are some contradictions. The discourse of 'Chineseness' in the school ethos is not compatible with the ethnic privileging in the affirmative action policy.

The curriculum has a more complex relationship with gender division. Knowledge in Malaysia, as in most countries, is constructed along masculine paradigms. The sciences are privileged over the liberal arts. The weaker students have particular abilities and skills that are not valued and tapped in the schooling system that emphasises pedagogical practices of streaming and academic ranking. This is also linked to the wider global context. It is the masculine forms of knowledge, the sciences and technology, that are valued as leading to being modern and economically successful.

Connell argues that an education that privilege? one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, evea a* \i gives him or her a social

or economic advantage. With school inequalities, come webs of power and then domination and oppression.

9.8 What is the locus of oppression for this group of schoolgirls?

Collins (1990) states that people experience and resist oppression on three levels; the level of personal biography, the group or community level or the cultural context created by gender, class and race, and the systemic level of social institutions. All three levels are sites of domination and potential sites of resistance. Resistance involves processes of contestations and struggles between students, and the discourses they negotiate.

Women are not just passive receivers of an oppression that is forced upon them. Women engage in active and passive forms of resistance (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989). Connell (1993) states that with both class and gender and - I add ethnicity - an understanding of the central mechanisms producing a social structure is available through the experiences of the groups subordinated by those mechanisms, not through the experience of the groups advantaged by them.

The notion of resistance has been a useful analytical tool in determining the locus of oppression for these schoolgirls in my study. There are various forms of oppression for these girls. There is politics of ethnic identification through the affirmative action policy for the top achieving Chinese girls that does not reward them for their academic excellence. The politics of ethnic identification also marginalises the Indian ethnic collective and privileges the Malay ethnic collective.

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Thus, women/girls are used to maintain visibility of the respective ethnic collectives. There are the 'traditional' ways of being an Indian and Malay girl for the academically successful Indian and Malay schoolgirls and some of the academically unsuccessful Indian and Malay schoolgirls. The Malay and Indian girls in this study have confirmed Yuval-Davis's (1994,1997) argument that it is the role of the women to carry the "burden of representation" as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively. These girls have stated that women/girls are responsible through their dressing and behaviour for controlling the sexual behaviour of the men. There are two interpretations of this expressed view. One is that the way the Muslim femininity is constructed is solely based on patriarchy. In contrast, some Muslim women say that donning the *tudung* and covering the *aurat* is their choice, expresses agency and is empowering. Some feminists would argue that this is an exampler of a fundamentally unequal society. It is complicated. Identifying resistance and compliance is a complicated task in view of these contradictory interpretations.

Another form of oppression is the positivistic pedagogical model of schooling (Giroux, 1997) that emphasises academic ranking and streaming and privileges Science over Arts.

Running through all these different forms of oppression is the notion of patriarchy. The politics of ethnic identification is manifested through Malay-male dominated policies with the constant contestations from the Chinese ethnic collective. Ways of being 'traditional' Malay and Indian women/girls is linked to the male structure and dominancy of the ethnic collective. The schooling and

education system is linked to the politics of ethnic identification that is embedded in patriarchy.

There are multiple foci of oppression but these are different versions of the same oppression, patriarchy. There is an overarching locus of oppression, namely patriarchy with interconnections to ethnicity in Malaysian context. This is manifested in multiple forms. The Chinese, Malay and Indian girls experience patriarchy differently. They might experience a different form of it, as it is responsive to context.

The social system of any society comprises patriarchal social relations embedded within interrelated structures. These patriarchal social relations are endemic and integral to social formations with regard to the distribution of material resources and power (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992). Gender and ethnicity may be dependent on different existential locations by they are not manifestations of different types of social relaions with distinct causal bases within distinct systems of domination.

9.9 Conclusion

Contemporary feminists theorists of identity and difference (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1986, 1990; Tsolidis, 1996, 2001; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997) theorise women's identity as being multifaceted and fluid. As seen, in this chapter and the previous three chapters, ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls entails processes of negotiations and contestations. Ways of being and knowing are fluid and always subject to socio-historical and political contexts, and

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are mediated by competing and sometimes contradictory discourses. These schoolgirls come into the schooling and class environment, one that advocates for pedagogical practices of streaming and academic ranking. They are also located within the nationalistic, ethnic and religious discourses in ways of being and knowing as a girl. These discourses the schoolgirls negotiate are embedded in webs of patriarchal power. Patriarchy is manifested in the discourses of gender, the politics of ethnic identification and discourses of schooling. As noted earlier, the Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls experience different forms of this locus of oppression. Ways of knowing and being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls in this particular site and context are located within processes of contestations and negotiations with multiple forms of patriarchal oppression as manifested through the discourses they mediate and have access to.

In the next chapter, I will revisit the research questions and show how the study has addressed them. I will recapitulate each chapter in providing a brief summary of the highlights of the chapters. I will also consider the implication of the findings of this study for future research on female identity as located within a feminist conceptual framework of identity and difference. In addition, I will revisit how my positionings have affected the presentation and analysis of my empirical data.

Chapter Ten

Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

In 2001, I attended the "New Girl Order" conference in London. The previous academic conference on girls had the theme 'First International Conference on Girls and Girlhood' and was held in 1992 at the Free University of Amsterdam. Most of the participants at the 2001 conference were either English or White Americans. There were very few coloured researchers at this conference. One of the keynote speakers, Christine Griffin, in reviewing the current status of research on young girls, said:

> Most youth research has focused on young white men and women in 'First World' contexts, and attempts to theorise their experiences have, however inadvertently, produced a set of theoretical perspectives and debates which revolve around the lives of Anglo-European (especially English) and Anglo-American young men and women (Griffin, 2001 p.6).

In most of this Eurocentric research on girls, ways of knowing and being girls are represented as white and middle-class. Griffin (2001) adds that contemporary feminist approaches to the study of girls can still reflect a tendency to represent 'Third World' cultures and the position of young women of colour in 'First World' societies as more 'traditional' or sexist as far as the position of girls and women is concerned. She further comments that,

> It is important to recognize the diversity of young women's lives, to appreciate the specific localized conditions in which young women live and to avoid adopting an Anglo-centric perspective in trying to understand the complexity of girls' lives and the constitution of girlhood (Griffin, 2001 p7-8).

The present study has added on to the diversity in ways of knowing and being girls. It has provided a window to the complexity of contemporary Malaysian society where the ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians live in a web of the politics of ethnic identification. Ethnicity is a powerful social dimension overriding all other social dimensions in the Malaysian context. Ethnicity is the overarching framework within which all Malaysians and, more importantly, Malay, Chinese, Indian and Others construct their self-identifications. Thus, with these schoolgirls, ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls is inextricably intertwined with the politics of ethnic identification. This study reaffirms the notion of multiple, shifting, contradictory and strategic ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls, but with ethnicity as the main dimension. The politics of ethnic identification is implicated in every facet of daily living in postcolonial Malaysia.

The overarching theoretical framework that guided this study is the feminist theorisation of difference (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1986, 1990; Mohanty, 1988, 1991; Spivak, 1990,1993, Tsolidis, 1996, 2001; Yeatman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997). This conceptual framework emphasises the experiences and context of the researcher, the research participants and the research site in the production of knowledge. At the end of my PhD journey, I conclude that, based on my experiences of doing research with this particular group of schoolgirls in the particular school, the multiple ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls entail a combination of the 'traditional* girl and the 'Western' girl. The notion of the 'Western' girl, as described by the girls in this study was one who wore revealing clothes, had social interactions with boys, was able to talk about sex, was

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fluent in English language, and watched and read Western media materials. The 'traditional' girl, as described by most of the girls in the individual and group interviews was the essentialised notion of being a girl from the ethnic group. This combination, of course, varies with each individual and is a strategic and political one. Some portions of the colonizer are implicated in my identity and the schoolgirls' identities. To be academically successful, at least with this group of girls, one has to be both a 'traditional' girl and a 'Western' girl. There is the interdependency between the colonizer and the colonized.

Furthermore, the main social dimension linked to ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls in this particular research site is ethnicity, or more specifically, the politics of ethnic identification. The Malaysian society^ as all societies, is complicated. However, what makes the Malaysian society unique are the processes of contestations, especially between the Malay and Chinese ethnic collectives, and at times - the processes involve the Indian and Others ethnic collectives. The interplay of the three major ethnic groups, Malays, Chinese and Indians makes the Malaysian society unique and complex. Our ways of knowing and being are all implicated >n how we understand the society in which we live.

In this next section, I reiterate the major findings of each chapter of this thesis

10.2 Recapitulating the chapters

In chapter one, I presented the Malaysian context to set the background of this thesis. I provided the personal, social and educational backdrop to this thesis. The

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politics of ethnic identification within contemporary Malaysia was outlined. The research questions of this study were described in relation to my personal experiences as a student and educator in Malaysia, and the wider societal politics. I outlined my own personal experiences as well as the ethnic politics that led me to this PhD project. The focus of the thesis was to provide a Malaysian theorising on ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls within a contemporary feminist conceptual framework of identity and difference (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1986, 1990; Tsolidis, 1996, 2001, Yeatman, 1994). I also addressed the importance of the notion of experience (Brah, 1996; Harding, 1987; Mohanty, 1992; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 1999), in spite of its problematic nature, to the study. The notion of experience was linked to notions of oppression (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Ramazanoglu, 1989) and emancipation within this conceptual feminist framework. I highlighted the multifaceted nature of oppressions as posited by feminists of colour (Brah, 1996; Bannerji, 1992; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1991). They posited that it is important to take into account that gender, ethnicity and other social dimensions articulate with each other in specific contexts when patriarchy is conceptualised as the locus of oppression. The research aims of this study were discussed in relation to the field of gender and education in contemporary Malaysia.

Chapter Two provided the social and political backdrop against which this study is crafted. I outlined some of the historical events within colonial Malaysia that led on to the present day politics of ethnic identification within contemporary postcolonial Malaysia. The notion of a Malaysian was conceptualised within a

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framework of sameness and differences, drawing upon Yuval-Davis's notion of ethnicity (Yuval-Davis, 1994, 1997). I problematised the notion of Malaysian and more specifically, Malay, Chinese, Indian and Others as being linked to the official and essentialistic labeling, present and historical social and political events, and experiences of daily living in Malaysia. The self-identification of a Malay, Chinese and Indian is located within the State's hegemonic ethnic dichotomies of *Bumiputera/non-Bumiputera* that is synonymous with the Malays/non-Malays and Muslims/non-Muslims dichotomy. However, there are multiple, shifting and contradictory ways of being Malaysian or, more significantly of being Malays, Chinese, Indians. I argued for the politics of ethnic identification in Malaysia being intertwined with the politics of difference, which in turn is linked to power and inequality. I drew upon the notion of ethnicity as conceptualised by Yuval-Davis (1994, 1997) to problematise ethnicity within the Malaysian context. I located the politics of ethnic identification in the social institution of education and the institutional practices of schooling.

In Chapter Three, I argued for the notion of female identity as posited by contemporary feminists of identity and difference (Alcoff, 1988; Brah, 1996; de Lauretis, 1986, 1990; Tsolidis, 1996, 2001, Yeatman, 1994). This framework resonated with the needs of my thesis both theoretically and experientially. This framework allowed a move away from a Eurocentric and malecentric form of theorising self-identifications of Malaysian schoolgirls. The Foucauldian notion of discourse was described as a useful analytical tool in understanding how women experience and make sense of their social world within webs of power. The link

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between state, gender and ethnicity in conceptualising ways of knowing and being woman/girl was also provided (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1994, 1997). Schooling was conceptualised as a site of identity contestation (Amot, David & Weiner, 1999; Connell, 1993; Haw, 1998; Giroux, 1997; Mac An Ghail, 1994; Tsolidis, 1996, 2001). The notion of resistance (Giroux, 1983; Zine, 2000) was explicated to make sense of the relationship between the institutional practices of schooling and the wider society as students negotiate their self-identifications. The notion of resistance was also conceptualised in relation oppression and patriarchy.

Chapter Four addressed the methodological framings of my thesis. I revisited the notion of experience as a source of knowledge in relation to both the research participants and myself as the researcher. I further interrogated the power dynamics in my relationship with the 16 year-old Malaysian girls and in relation to the politics of ethnic identification in contemporary Malaysia. I argued that my positioning as a Malaysian~Indian~Christian~female~educator occupies simultaneously both an elite and marginal position in Malaysia. My own ways of being and knowing are multiple, shifting and rtrategic and political. This in turn has influenced not only the manner in which my seven month fieldwork was conducted but also the manner in which I approached, read and analyzed my fieldwork materials. My theorisation of the self-identifications of these 34 Malaysian schoolgirls is not one that is objective but very subjective. The research methods, namely the free-format essays on experiences of being a girl and

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schooling, the individual and group interviews, my observations and informal disussions with the teachers, employed in this study were described in this chapter.

I described the school, Parkview Girls Secondary school in Chapter Five in terms of the students' and teachers' ethnic distribution. The discourses of the school as well as the profiles of the classes were represented through the girls' voices as well as my own observations. The 34 sixteen-year old Malaysian schoolgirls were from the highest and two lowest achieving classes in Form Four. I discussed the dkoourses of schooling that included the pedagogical practices of streaming and academic ranking, the privileging of the Sciences over the Arts, and the 'Chineseness' in the school ethos. The personal and academic details of the girls who volunteered for this study were also presented in this chapter in a brief summary and in tabular form.

In Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, I presented the analysis of these schoolgirls according to the ethnic categories of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Others girls within a framework of identity and difference. The schoolgirls were clustered into two groups of academically successful and academically unsuccessful schoolgirls. This clustering was based on their academic ranking and class stream. I presented the schoolgirls as clusters of girls along the continuum: 'Westem'-'traditional' girl and in relation to essentialised notions of Malay, Chinese and Indian girls. I also discussed these clusters of girls in relation to their conforming and rebellious behaviour in school, and attitudes towards schooling.

In Chapter Nine, I provided a reading of ways of being Malaysian schoolgirls through the conceptual lenses of identity and difference using the notion of

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resistance. The discursive spaces that these schoolgirls are located within were discussed. There is the state's discourse that advocates for preferential educational and economic policies for the ethnic majority of Malays through the affirmative action policy. There is the discourse of schooling that is linked to the politics of ethnic identification. There are also the discourses of ways of being a girl within the ethnic collectivities of which they are members. I used the notion of resistance to unpack the complex link between ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls, the institutional practices of schooling and the wider Malaysian society. I argued for patriarchy as the locus of oppression for these schoolgirls, it being the focus of the intertwining of gender and ethnicity. Inequalities within the social and educational system in Malaysia are manifested through the notion of patriarchy that is in turn intertwined with the politics of ethnic identification. The Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls experienced patriarchy in different ways.

10.3 Main findings of the study

The aim of this study was to identify and discuss the similarities and differences in personal and collective ways of being Malay, Chinese and Malay schoolgirls within the schooling site. I also examined the patternings between ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schooling girls to their educational outcomes. The notion of resistance was adopted as an analytical tool to unpack the link between state, schooling and these girls' experiences.

The research revealed that there is no one fixed and definite way of being a Malay, Chinese or Indian schoolgirl. The girls negotiate their identity by

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manipulating a range of available discourses. The schoolgirls are located within competing and contradictory discourses in ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls. The girls from each of the ethnic categories hold essentialised notions of what a girl from their ethnic collectivity should be like. There are varying degrees to which they assume some of these essentialised notions within their own way of being a schoolgirl. Differences within and between the ethnic categories emerged from their negotiations with the different discourses that framed their experiences, particularly the discourses of schooling, gender and the politics of ethnic identification.

The discourses of 'Muslimness' which includfi the *tudung, aurat,,* limited social interaction with boys, and 'feminine' behaviour were a defining feature in ways of being 'traditional' Malay girls. The Malay girls' understandings of what it meant to be a Muslim girl came mainly from the religious subject in school, which is *V:* ked to the patriarchal institutional practice of the state, the religious clerics and the Ministry of Education. All the Malay schoolgirls in this study adopted some or most of the characteristics of the 'traditional' Malay girl which was synonymous with the discourses of Muslim femininity. The Chinese girls' understandings of the 'traditional' Chinese girl included being hardworking, competitive, having the *kiasu* attitudes of 'always wanting to win and being afraid to lose'. The top Chinese girls were the most *kiasu* and most 'Western' of all the thirty-four schoolgirls involved in this study. The Indian schoolgirls' understandings of the 'traditional' Indian schoolgirl was synonymous with the role of the Indian woman as prescribed by the Indian community. The 'traditional' Indian girl wears the *pottu,* has long hair, has

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no boyfriend, is obedient to parents, does not wear revealing clothes and adheres to Indian customs and traditions.

There is some relationship between ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls and educational outcomes. The top girls in the school were the Chinese girls who assumed most of the characteristics of the 'Western' and 'traditional' Chinese girl. They exhibited both rebellious and conforming behaviour in school. They were resistant to discourses of the politics of ethnic identification and discourses of schooling, yet they were academically very successful. The academically unsuccessful 'traditional' Malay and Indian schoolgirls were resistant to discourses of schooling and exhibited mainly conforming behaviour in school. The academically unsuccessful Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls who assumed some of the characteristics of the 'Western' girl and a few of those of the 'traditional' girl were resistant to discourses of gender and schooling and exhibited mainly rebellious behaviours in school.

Being 'Western' and having *kiasu* attitudes is linked with very high grades and active resistance to schooling and the politics of ethnic identification. Being 'traditional' girls is linked with low grades, compliance to school rules and authority, and passive resistance to school. A combination of more 'Western' than 'traditional' characteristics in ways of being girls was linked to rebellious behaviour in school and active resistance to discourses of schooling and gender.

In general, the main locus of oppression for this group of 34 schoolgirls in this particular school, is patriarchy as located within the intertwining of gender and ethnicity. Resistance for these girls involved processes of contestation with

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patriarchy as manifested in the interplay of gender and ethnicity through the discourses of gender, schooling and the politics of ethnic identification.

10.4 Reflections on my role as the researcher

At the beginning of this thesis, in Chapter One, I stated that the researcher is very much part of the discourse they create. I would like to reflect on my research findings in relation to my situatedness in this research. I said at the beginning that I am aware of my locations. Now, after the analysis and conclusion, I want to highlight significant junctures in this study that point to how my positionings affected the direction and outcome of this study.

I asked only the high achievers about the affirmative action policy. I did this because I did not think that the low achievers would have anything to negotiate on this policy. I also gave the opportunity to some girls, namely the high achieving girls, to comment on the other girls. This shows that I am very much socialized into the system of educational achievement. My primary lens is related to academic achievement. There is the privileging of the educational elite in the way I carried out my fieldwork. There is no ethnic bias here, save that which is a result of the way the girls are positioned in education by their ethnicity. I took more serious notice of those who achieved academically. In my field notes, I have written, 'Why do I feel sad and depressed after talking to the girls in 4 Arts C? Why aren't they achieving? They are not motivated in their studies'. I have also written, 'It is very challenging talking to the girls in 4 Science A especially the top achievers, we have interesting discussions. I seem to be able to relate to them better, it is easier to talk to them,

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easier to get their opinions. Why are there silences with some of the 4 Arts C girls? Why are they so accepting? Why aren't they challenging schooling?'

I also wrote the following in my fieldnotes: 'Am I being biased here as a Malaysian educator, in a system that places much importance on academic achievement?' There is no doubt that the interaction between the researcher and reseaich participants is influenced by the values and background of the researcher.

The other issue was my interaction with the three Indian girls from 4 Arts C, the lowest achieving class. They were the only ones in this study who asked me about my ethnicity. This happened on one occasion when I was with them in the school canteen during recess time. They asked me whether I was an Indian and if I spoke Tamil. I told them I was a Tamil but did not speak Tamil very well. They replied that I looked 'mixed'. The term 'mixed' in the Malaysian context refers to Malaysians with parents of different ethnicities, for example one parent could be Chinese and the other Indian. The term 'mixed' also refers to Eurasians. What is interesting is that the Chinese and Malay girls did not enquire about my ethnicity. The way these three Indian girls viewed me, affected the extent to which they shared and described their experiences of being girls and of schooling with me. As noted in Chapter Four, I was a stranger yet to some extent I was a friend with most of the girls. I did ask the giris the reasons they volunteered for the study at the end of the fieldwork. The following are some of the responses:

> Being in the project...I can release tension when I have problems...when I tell you...1 feel relieved (Suraya of 4 Arts B).

> Because it sounded interesting lah...something different lah...I mean no one cared to come and look at us...hi...I am interested to interview you...and I would like to know what is happening in your life...so we must take the opportunity to join (Nalini of 4 Science A).

A few of the girls from 4 Arts C said they felt relieved when they shared their experiences with me. A few of the girls from this study said that they did not share everything, with me especially issues to do with the family as it would have taken too long and these matters were too personal.

I am very much a product and a possible perpetuator of the dominant way of understanding educational achievement in Malaysia, namely through the pedagogical practices of streaming snd academic ranking that advocates high grades and values the Sciences.

My personal, schooling and social experiences as a Malaysian~Indian~Christian female educator has played a crucial part in the construction and representation of this thesis. As Alcoff (1991) states,

> Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act of political struggle (Alcoff, 1991 p. 21).

10.5 My reflections as I move on from here

It has been challenging handling the three ethnic groups of Malaysian girls - Malays, Chinese and Indians. The challenges have come at various levels of this project - emotionally, theoretically and methodologically - not necessarily in that order. This thesis has been a very personal and political journey for me. A lot of memories of my schooling days and teaching days have been evoked through my conversations with these girls, and even as I wrote up the thesis. I went through a similar school system as did these girls, one that advocated streaming and academic ranking. I encountered the streaming procedures as these girls did at the age of 15 years. The Science stream was then always more valued than the Arts stream. The

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academic ranking started when I entered primary school at the age of 7 years. In addition to this, I also encountered the politics of ethnic identification at each level of the education and social system *h* Malaysia. The discourses in which I was located in during my schooling days b^r similarity to those of these girls. However, the time factor is different - society evolves.

I could identify with some of the contradictions and negotiations these girls were facing.

I still remember some of the comments some academics made when I embarked on my PhD studies with the aim of examining the gender identity of Malaysian teenage schoolgirls. How can you handle all these ethnic groups when there is so much to read and write on one ethnic group? I still remember attempting to answer back. How can you not have all groups in the research - as their identity is formed in relation to one another? Furthermore, in the Malaysian context where the ethnic politics is prevalent in every stratum of the society, I felt that it would be theoretically and methodologically challenging to conceptualise the inter- and intraethnic dynamics in the gender identifications of Malaysian teenage schoolgirls.

As I write this last chapter, there is still a number of ambivalences in the questions I posed in Chapter 1. I wanted to find definite patternings in the interweaving between the gender identity of the girls and their experiences of schooling. I did find some but there were a number of exceptions to the patterning. I wanted to conclude very much that the high achieving girls in all the ethnic groups would be the well-balanced girls, those located between the global, liberated, modern girl and the hardworking, highly motivated girl. I also wanted to conclude

that the low achievers would be rebellious, rude, overly social and basically girls that exhibited rebellious behaviour in school. It was not as simple a dichotomy as that. Such a clear pattern was not to be.

These girls are located within competing and contradictory discourses. Their agency in interrogating these discourses and this results in differences within and between the ethnic categories. Just as our identities are in flux, constantly shifting between identity and difference, these girls' identifications are multiple, shifting, contradictory and strategic.

Another nagging question behind my mind as I write this last chapter is where would I be today if there had been no politics of ethnic identification in Malaysia nor the discourses privileging academic excellence in these schools. What if the Malaysian education system functioned solely on meritocracy? Though I have yet to come across any other society that solely functions on meritocracy, education systems are always political with a strong flavour of ethnic politics. Would I be here writing up my PhD thesis on an Australian scholarship? Would I still be a Malaysian academic? I have not been able to resolve such questions and will leave this question as it is, with the strong belief that, as any other individual in any other society, our existence and self-identifications are political as we negotiate with the discourses to which we have access. And these discourses vary for each of us, as our personal background is different.

10.6 Implications for future research

The findings of this study reaffirm the necessity for the conceptualisation of the notion of resistance to move beyond the traditional class based structure and

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consider the interplay of multiple social dimensions. This notion of resistance located within the interplay of social differences is useful in unpacking the link between the state, schooling as an institutional practice, and the expressed experience of students. The notion of resistance is also useful in making sense of the locus of oppression in ways of being girls within the schooling environment. This study highlights the importance of context and historicity in theorising ways of being and knowing. It is also imperative to consider the inter and intra dynamics of the various collectives, be they ethnic or other social categories in examining ways of being and knowing as we construct our self-identifications in relation to others.

This study which reaffirms the notion of multiple, shifting and contradictory ways of being Malay, Chinese and Indian schoolgirls, also brought to light that it is ethnicity that is the main dimension in being Malaysian girls. This Malaysian feminist perspective could be adapted to both 'non-Western' and[1] 'Western' multiethnic societies in taking into account the intertwining of personal experiences, the inter and inira dynamics between the ethnic collectives, institutional practices and nationhoond in understanding ways of knowing and being women/girls. Such a framework emphasizes the experiences, power dynamics and context of the researcher, the research participants and the research site in the production of knowledge. This emphasizes the agency~structure dyad in identity construction; in being multiple, shifting, contradictory within a political and structural context.

Moreover, there is an urgent need for critical interrogation of researchers' positionings as the researchers' values and backgrounds play a crucial role in every phase of the research process.

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10.7 Concluding remarks

10.7.1 The future of the girls

As I end this thesis, these Malaysian schoolgirls have obtained their results for the *SPM* examination, for which they sat at the end of last year. A number of non-Malay girls in the high achieving classes are now in private colleges pursuing overseas matriculation courses. Yen Ling is doing the South Australian matriculation course. She hopes to take a double degree course in Accounting and Business in one of the top Australian universities. Her classmate, Nalini is also enrolled in an Australian matriculation program. Su Mei the top girl is doing her A levels in England on a scholarship. Priya in her last email to me wrote:

> Malays...you knowlah...they all can enter matriculation...so no worries for
> them...Indian gals...I think a number of them are in private colleges (Priya
> of 4 Science A).

Some of these girls are enrolled in the twinning degree programs with overseas universities and some will head directly for overseas universities. Most of the students in the private colleges in Malaysia are non-Malays, namely Chinese. They have the choice of opting out of the public Malaysian education system. There are also those with financial constraints who will follow the Form 6 route and get into the public university system. The Malay girls in the top achieving classes are participating in the local university matriculation courses or directly into the public universities for a diploma that leads on to a degree course.

As for the girls from the low achieving classes, some will get into the private colleges and some will go out into the working world. To a great extent, the financial background of the family determines the route they take. There are also the Malay girls who have a chance at the public universities if their grades are not

too low.   However, non-Malays with such grades would not have these opportunities.

The professionals in the private sector are mainly non-Malays and the professionals in the public sectors are usually Malays.   This study shows that Malaysian schoolgirls located within the politics of ethnic identification construct self-identifications as Malaysian schoolgirls in multiple, shifting and contradictory ways.   Their identities are strategic and political.

The politics of ethnic identification impinge upon these Malaysian schoolgirls' gendered self-identifications. The ethnicity of Malaysian schoolgirls determines their future pathway as women.   There are spaces and opportunities for both *Ma\ays/Bumiputeras* as well as non-Malays/non-l?wro/pwteras to manoeuvre and construct their identities - the public~government and private~corporate sectors. But positions within these spaces are also dependent on ethnicity, gender and class.

10.7.2 Multiple, shifting apd contradictory ways of being Malaysian schoolgirls

Identity is interpreted or reconstructed by each one of us, (be it the Malaysian schoolgirls or myself as the Malaysian researcher), within horizons of meanings and knowledges available in the culture at given historical moments, a horizon that includes modes of political commitment and struggle (de Lauretis, 1986). Identity is always grasped and understood within particular discursive configurations.

I end this thesis as I began with excerpts from these 16-year old schoolgirls (who are 18 going on to 19 years of age now).   The excerpts once again emphasise

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the multiple, shifting and contradictory ways of being Malay, Chinese and Ir %n schoolgirls.

Sharmala, an Indian-Catholic girl from Arts B, the naughty and rebellious class, wrote in her essay on experiences of being a girl:

> · The life of a teenage girl...confusing, clear, joyous, miserable, fun, scary, confident, insecure...doesn't that sum up the emotional see-saw of an average teenager...I should know...I have been there and I still am (Sharmala of 4 Arts B).

Su Mei, a Chinese girl and the top girl in the form who is now doing her A-levels in England on a scholarship. She also spoke of the oppressive nature of schooling in the individual interview:

> We are women-girl-adolescents...we look like women now...maybe we don't play with dolls anymore...but we are not that responsible yet...which is what a mature woman is supposed to be...and maybe we are not able to think in that way or make sacrifices...we are still very selfish (Su Mei of 4 Science A).

Suraya of Arts C, a Malay Muslim girl who did singing and dancing with the local council youth group commented in the one-to-one interview:

> It is boring coming to school everyday...I like teachers who are caring and humourous...our class teachers do not care for us...teachers here like to differentiate between the smart and not so smart students (Suraya of 4 Arts Q.

These Malay, Chinese and Indian school girls' self-identifications, as Alcoff (1988) states, are relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, social and political institutions. In contemporary Malaysia, the politics of ethnic identification are intermeshed in all these discourses.

I have through this thesis added to the body of knowledge on contemporary feminist theorizations of identity and difference. In Mohanty's (1991) terms, this

PhD thesis has been an academic and personal endeavour of rewriting history based on specific locations and histories of struggle of people of colour and postcolonial peoples and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples.

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Appendix A: Statistical Information on Malaysia

Table A1: Population size and age-structure, 1995 - 2005 (millions persons)
(from Eight Malaysia Plan:2001-2005)

	1995	%	2000(1)	%
Total population	**20.68**		**23.27**	
Citizens	19.68	*100.0*	22.04	*100.0*
Bumiputera	12.47	*63.3*	14.56	*66.1*
Chinese	5.22	*26.5*	5.58	*25.3*
Indian	1.49	*7.6*	1.63	*7.4*
Others	0.50	*2.6*	0.27	*1.2*
Non-citizens	1.00		1.23	
Age structure				
0-14	7.25.	*35.0*	7.71	*33.1*
15-64	12.71	*61.5*	14.62	*62.9*
65 and above	0.72	*3.5*	0.94	*4.0*
Median age	22.8		23.9	

The next two tables show that the *Bumiputeras* and the Chinese collectivities are

faring well economically and socially in comparison to the Indians and Others.

Table A2: Employment by occupation and ethnic group, 2000 (from Eight Malaysia
Plan: 2001-2005)

Occupation	Bumiputera		Chinese		Inidians		Others	
Year	1995	2000	1995	2000	1995	2000	1995	2000
Professional & Technical	64.4%	63.9%	25.7%	25.8%	7.0%	7.6%	2.9%	2.7%
Teachers & Nurses	72.3%	73.2%	20.5%	18.4%	6.6%	6.9%	0.6%	1.5%
Administrative & Managerial	36.8%	37.0%	52.5%	52.3%	4.8%	5.5%	5.9%	5.2%
Clerical workers	57.5%	56.8%	33.8%	32.9%	7.4%	8.6%	1.3%	1.7%
Sales workers	36.4%	37.3%	50.2%	49.8%	6.2%	6.8%	7.2%	6.1%
Service workers	57.3%	57.5%	21.6%	21.8%	8.2%	8.5%	12.9%	2.0%
Agriculture workers	61.3%	61.2%	11.9%	10.3%	6.9%	6.9%	19.9%	1.6%
Production workers	44.2%	44.7%	33.7%	33.8%	9.6%	0.0%	12.5%	1.5%
Total	51.4%	51.5%	29.6%	29.7%	7.9%	8.3%	11.1%	0.5%

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Table A3 : Ownership of Share Capital (at par value) of Limited Companies, 1995 and 1999 (from Eight Malaysia Plan: 2001-2005)

Ownership Group	1995	1999
Bumipulra	*20.6%*	*19.1%*
Individuals & Institutions	18.6%	17.4%
Trust Agencies	2.0%	1.7%
Other Malaysians	*43.4%*	*40.3%*
Chinese	40.9%	37.9%
Indians	1.5%	1.5%
Others	1.0%	0.9%
Foreigners	*27.7%*	*32.7%*
Nominee companies	*8.3%*	*7.9%*

Appendix B: The Malaysian schooling system

Education is the responsibility of the Federal Government in Malaysia. The Malaysian education system provides 11 years of free, basic education to every child in the country. The educational structure is 6-3-2 that is 6 years of primary education, three years of lower secondary and two years of upper secondary. Most schools in the country are government or government-aided schools, [mention how many schools-look at the stats]. Students sit for common public exams at the end of primary (Primary Schools Assessment Test), lower secondary (Lower Secondary Assessment Examinations), upper secondary (Malaysian Certificate cf Education) and sixth form levels (Malaysian Higher School Certificate Examination).

Primary education in Malaysia is provided in one of the three mediums of instructions. The medium of instruction in National Primary schools is the Malay language. The medium of instruction in National Type Chinese schools is Chinese and National Type Tamil schools, Tamil. Majority of the schools in Malaysia are National schools. All students at the primary school level are automatically promoted to the lower secondary level.

Students are streamed into 3 types of lower secondary schools, regular day schools, fully residential schools and MARA Junior Science Colleges. MARA schools fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and not the Ministry of Education. MARA *(Majlis Amanah Rakyat)* is a statutory government agency responsible for developing entrepreneurship amongst *Bumiputeras,* especially those in the rural areas. Fully residential schools and MARA Junior Science colleges are elite schools reserved only for *Bumiputera*

students.   The Primary Schools Assessment Test is used as the main criterion for entrance into these schools. In theory, rural *Bumiputeras* are given more preference to enter these schools although in practice, there are significant number of students from the middle and professional classes of the *Bumiputera* society.

The physical facilities in these colleges were much better than that of the regular day schools. The student-teacher ratio in these colleges is lower than that of the regular day schools. Before the economic crisis in 1994, a significant number of the top students in these colleges were sent overseas to do their degree course on a full government scholarship after their Form Five. Most were sent either to England or America.

Lower secondary education covers a period of 3 years.   Students from the national primary schools enter Form 1 whereas students from the Chinese and Tamil medium schools proceed to a transition year (remove class) before entering form 1. The purpose of this remove class is for students to acquire sufficient proficiency in the Malay language which is the medium of instruction in secondary schools.

Education at the upper secondary level covers a period of 2 years. Upper secondary education is divided into three streams - the academic, technical and vocational streams.   There are three kinds of upper secondary schools in the academic stream - regular day schools, folly residential schools, and MARA Junior Science Colleges.   The last two schools are largely reserved mainly for *Bumiputeras.*   In the regular day schools, students used to be streamed into the Arts and Science streams, but since 1992 when the implementation of the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum reached Form Four, students are allowed a more

liberal choice of elective subjects. However, many schools still force students into the selection of subjects that conform to the traditional science and arts stream packages (Loo, 2000).

Vocational secondary schools provide courses in individual trade skills for less academically-inclined learners. Secondary technical education is aimed at producing qualified students who excel in mathematics and science as well as in basic engineering subjects.

At the end of the two years of upper secondary education, students sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Education *(SPM* - the Malay acronym for *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia)*, a national examination which is equivalent to the British GCE 'O' level. The students in vocational schools sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (Vocational) Examination *(SPM* (V)). Students either continue their post-secondary education or enter the labour marker after the *SPM* or *SPM* (V).

Post-secondary education in Malaysia is divided into college, polytechnic and pie-university education (Loo, 2000). Students who wish to pursue their studies up to the certificate and diploma levels enter Teacher Education Colleges, Polytechnics, the MARA Institute of Technology and the Tunku Abdul Rahman College where professional courses are offered.

Pre-university post-secondary education again highlights the dichotomy of education opportunities between privileged *Bumiputera* students and not-so-privileged *non-Bumiputera* students (Loo, 2000). High-achieving *Bumiputera* students are absorbed directly into matriculation courses. This more or less guaranteed them entry into choice courses in Malaysian public universities (Loo,

2000). The top *Bumiputera* students are usually sent overseas on government scholarships. Other students, especially *non-bumiputera* students enter Form Six where university entrance is dependent on performance in the Malaysian Higher School Certificate Examination *{STPM* - the Malay acronym for *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia).* This examination was initially based on the British GCE "A" level.

Students from financially well-off families have the option of entering high fee private colleges that offer twinning and credit transfer programmes leading to degree courses in foreign universities on a 2+1 basis (2 years in a local host institution and 1 year in the parent foreign university overseas). Many private colleges in Malaysia now offer pre-university courses leading to 3+0 programmes which allow the entire degree programme to be conducted in a local host institution. With the passing of the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act of 1996, foreign universities are now allowed to set up branch campuses in Malaysia. The growth of private, English-medium colleges has been in response to a growing demand for higher education among Chinese students, especially those denied places in public universities due to the ethnic quota system (Andaya & Andaya, 2001). Many also prefer an English-medium education as it is seen as improving one's chances of employment (especially in the corporate sector) and further education overseas (Andaya & Andaya, 2001)

At higher education level, there are 11 public universities, 12 private universities (3 of these are run by government corporations and 4 are branch

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campuses of foreign universities), 6 polytechnics, 27 teacher-training colleges and about 600 private colleges (Lee, 2001).