



# GROWING UP FEMALE IN MULTI-ETHNIC MALAYSIA

Cynthia Joseph

# **Growing up Female in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia**

This book provides a rich, detailed analysis of the experiences of young women growing up in postcolonial, rapidly modernizing Malaysia. It considers the impact of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and school experiences and achievement. It discusses the effects of Malaysia's ethnic affirmative action programmes and of the country's Islamization. It sets out and compares the life trajectories of Malay, Indian and Chinese young women, making use of interview and questionnaire data gathered over a long period. It thereby depicts individuals' transformations as they experience maturing into adulthood against a background of social and economic changes, and varying levels of inter-racial tension.

**Cynthia Joseph** is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Australia.

# ASIAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

## Women in Asia Series

**Editor:** Lenore Lyons (The University of Sydney)

### **Editorial Board:**

Susan Blackburn (Monash University)  
Hyaeweol Choi (The Australian National University)  
Michele Ford (The University of Sydney)  
Louise Edwards (University of Hong Kong)  
Trude Jacobsen (Northern Illinois University)  
Vera Mackie (University of Wollongong)  
Anne McLaren (The University of Melbourne)  
Mina Roces (University of New South Wales)  
Dina Siddiqi (The City University of New York)  
Andrea Whittaker (The University of Queensland)

### **Mukkuvar Women**

Gender, hegemony and capitalist transformation in a South Indian fishing community  
*by Kalpana Ram 1991*

### **A World of Difference**

Islam and gender hierarchy in Turkey  
*by Julie Marcus 1992*

### **Purity and Communal Boundaries**

Women and social change in a Bangladeshi village  
*by Santi Rozario 1992*

### **Madonnas and Martyrs**

Militarism and violence in the Philippines  
*by Anne-Marie Hilsdon 1995*

### **Masters and Managers**

A study of gender relations in urban Java  
*by Norma Sullivan 1995*

### **Matriliney and Modernity**

Sexual politics and social change in rural Malaysia  
*by Maila Stivens 1995*

### **Intimate Knowledge**

Women and their health in North-east Thailand  
*by Andrea Whittaker 2000*

### **Women in Asia**

Tradition, modernity and globalisation  
*by Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (eds) 2000*

### **Violence against Women in Asian Societies**

Gender inequality and technologies of violence  
*by Lenore Manderson and Linda Rae Bennett (eds) 2003*

### **Women's Employment in Japan**

The experience of part-time workers  
*by Kaye Broadbent 2003*

**Chinese Women Living  
and Working**

*by Anne McLaren (ed.) 2004*

**Abortion, Sin and the State  
in Thailand**

*by Andrea Whittaker 2004*

**Sexual Violence and  
the Law in Japan**

*by Catherine Burns 2004*

**Women, Islam and Modernity**

Single women, sexuality and  
reproductive health in contemporary  
Indonesia

*by Linda Rae Bennett 2005*

**The Women's Movement in  
Post-Colonial Indonesia**

*by Elizabeth Martyn 2005*

**Women and Work in Indonesia**

*by Michele Ford and  
Lyn Parker (eds) 2008*

**Women and Union  
Activism in Asia**

*by Kaye Broadbent and  
Michele Ford (eds) 2008*

**Gender, Islam, and Democracy  
in Indonesia**

*by Kathryn Robinson 2008*

**Sex, Love and Feminism in the  
Asia Pacific**

A cross-cultural study of young  
people's attitudes

*by Chilla Bulbeck 2008*

**Gender, State and Social Power**

Divorce in contemporary Indonesia  
*by Kate O'Shaughnessy 2008*

**Gender, Household, and  
State in Post-Revolutionary  
Vietnam**

*by Jayne Werner 2008*

**Young Women in Japan**

Transitions to adulthood

*by Kaori Okano 2009*

**Women, Islam and Everyday Life**

Renegotiating polygamy  
in Indonesia

*by Nina Nurmila 2009*

**Feminist Movements in  
Contemporary Japan**

*by Laura Dales 2009*

**Gender and Labour in Korea  
and Japan**

Sexing class

*by Ruth Barraclough and  
Elyssa Faison (eds) 2009*

**Gender Diversity in Indonesia**

Sexuality, Islam and  
queer selves

*by Sharyn Graham Davies 2010*

**New Women in  
Colonial Korea**

A sourcebook

*by Hyaeweol Choi 2012*

**Women Writers in  
Postsocialist China**

*by Kay Schaffer and  
Xianlin Song 2013*

**Domestic Violence in Asia**

Globalization, gender and Islam in  
the Maldives

*by Emma Fulu 2014*

**Gender and Power in Indonesian Islam**

Leaders, feminists, sufis  
and pesantren selves

*by Bianca J. Smith and*

*Mark Woodward (eds) 2014*

**Practicing Feminism in South Korea**

The women's movement against  
sexual violence

*by Kyungja Jung 2014*

**The Korean Women's Movement and  
the State**

Bargaining for change

*by Seung-kyung Kim 2014*

**Gender, Nation and State in  
Modern Japan**

*Andrea Germer,*

*Vera Mackie and*

*Ulrike Wöhr (eds) 2014*

**Women and Sex Work  
in Cambodia**

Blood, sweat and tears

*by Larissa Sandy 2014*

**Growing up Female in  
Multi-Ethnic Malaysia**

*by Cynthia Joseph 2014*

# **Growing up Female in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia**

**Cynthia Joseph**

First published 2014  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2014 Cynthia Joseph

The right of Cynthia Joseph to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Joseph, Cynthia, author.

Growing up female in multi-ethnic Malaysia / Cynthia Joseph.

pages cm. – (Women in Asia series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Summary: "This book provides a rich, detailed analysis of the experiences of young women growing up in post-colonial, rapidly modernizing Malaysia. It considers the impact of ethnicity, socio-economic status, and school experiences and achievement. It discusses the effects of Malaysia's ethnic affirmative action programmes and of the country's Islamisation. It sets out and compares the life trajectories of Malay, Indian and Chinese young women, making use of interview and questionnaire data gathered over a long period"– Provided by publisher.

1. Young women–Malaysia. 2. Young women–Education–Malaysia. 3. High school girls–Malaysia. 4. Malaysia–Ethnic relations. I. Title.

HQ1750.6.J675 2014

305.409595–dc 3

2014006305

ISBN: 978-0-415-62922-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-75908-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by Taylor & Francis Books

# Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 Ethnicities in postcolonial Malaysia	22
2 Education in the 21st century	50
3 Young women in multi-ethnic Malaysia	66
4 Parkview Girls High School	81
5 Academically high achieving girls	96
6 Academically low achieving girls	122
7 Post-school education and training	142
8 Becoming workers: occupational destinations	160
9 Becoming women: marriage, sexuality and gender relations	176
Conclusion	187
<i>Bibliography</i>	195
<i>Index</i>	208



# List of illustrations

## Figures

1.1	Map of Southeast Asia	23
1.2	Map of Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia/West Malaysia and East Malaysia)	24
1.3	Map of colonial Malaya	28

## Tables

1.1	Ethnic composition of the population, Peninsular Malaya/Malaysia 1911–2000	29
4.1	Ethnic composition of Form Four girls according to science and arts streams	82
4.2	Subjects examined by the Lower Secondary Assessment	83
4.3	Form Four subject combinations in the science and arts streams	84

# Acknowledgements

I dedicate this book to my parents:

to the memory of my father, Joseph Jeganathan, who always emphasized the importance of both academic education and the wisdom from life experiences in living a meaningful life.

to my mother, Rosaline Sandanasamy, who grew up as a child during the Malaya colonial period, went to school during the post-independence era, got married during the postcolonial period, and continues to be a woman in her own right in contemporary Malaysia

I have been blessed by many guardian angels throughout working on this book, and more generally in my work and life. This book has been made possible through the support and encouragement of family, friends and colleagues over the past years.

Rosemary Viete and Beverly Axford provided me with their valuable and insightful editorial advice. I will always treasure the numerous intellectual and cultural exchanges we had over the course of my book project.

A special thanks to my mum, Rosaline Sandanasamy, my brother, Gerard Joseph and my aunty, Padhma Doraisamy.

Special thanks to my inspiring friends and academic ‘soul sisters’ who believe in me and continue to motivate me with their positive spirit, thoughtfulness and generosity throughout my journey – Heidi Mirza, Evie Tastoglou and Margaret Abraham.

I have also learned much from my academic mentors Terri Seddon, Brett Inder and S Gopinathan – who continue to provide me with their encouragement and critique.

A special gratitude to my colleagues and friends who have been a great support in my work – Rosemary Viete, Maria George, Jennifer McKay, Selena Nemorin and Faridah Haron.

I would like to thank the many friends and colleagues in Australia, Malaysia and overseas who were in one way or another part of my academic and cultural journeys.

The dean, academic and professional staff members of the Faculty of Education, Monash University in Australia have provided the educational resources and moral support to successfully complete this book.

My special thanks go to Lenore Lyons (Routledge Series Editor *Women in Asia*) for her valuable feedback and support in completing this book project.

I also thank Peter Sowden (Editor, Routledge) and Jillian Morrison (Senior Editorial Assistant, Routledge) for their support and publication of this book. A special word of thanks to Sabrina Lacey (eProduction Editor, Routledge) for her advice and support during the production phase of my book.

I would like to specially thank the young women of Parkview Girls High School who shared so much of their lives with me over the years. Thank you for allowing me to enter your lives and share your joys, struggles and aspirations. Your life experiences as transcultural young women in this new millennium represent the heart of this book. I wish you all the very best in all your future undertakings.

To God for granting me the grace in my academic and transcultural journeys.

# Introduction

## **Ethnicity, gender and education**

The schooling system differentiates between the clever and not-so-clever students. It is a discrimination of stupidity. They are judging the students. If you are not in the Science A class, you are seen as being stupid.

(Su Lin 2000)

The university is mostly populated by Malays and they get all the priorities. It is not like they cover it up. They do it all in the open.

(Yoke Lin 2006)

I am not the 'typical' Malay-Muslim – someone who is complacent, dependent and conforming.

(Intan 2006)

I work in the recruitment business. Some of the clients are specific and they say they only want Chinese workers. We are not allowed to ask them the reasons when they make this request.

(Sharmala 2006)

In 2000, Su Lin, a Malaysian schoolgirl of Chinese ethnicity commented on the discriminatory educational practices of streaming and academic ranking that were prevalent in her school. Not only were the classes ranked according to academic ability, but the schoolgirls were ranked in terms of their academic achievement. Su Lin completed her secondary schooling in Malaysia and she went to America to pursue her studies, which her parents were financing. She continued with her postgraduate studies in America. Su Lin's former classmate, Yoke Lin, in 2006 was completing a degree at a Malaysian public university where most students and lecturers were Malay-Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Ethnic politics frustrated this young Chinese woman. Yet she studied hard, was competitive and attained high grades. Her goal was to work in the corporate or private sector where most of the top and middle echelon professionals are Chinese. Her former schoolmate, Intan, who had been a low achieving,

## 2 Introduction

rebellious Malay–Muslim schoolgirl, was working as a secretary to an operations manager in an American multinational company in Malaysia. She had decided that she was not the ‘typical’ Malay–Muslim – whom she saw as ‘complacent, dependent and conforming’ – yet she invoked her Malay identity through her dress and demeanour and continued to enjoy her special ethnic privileges when, for example, it came to obtaining discounts on house prices. Their schoolmate, Sharmala, who was a low achieving, rebellious Indian schoolgirl, was working in a human resources recruitment agency, where most of her colleagues were Chinese. She told me when I interviewed her in 2006, that she was strategic in ‘hanging out’ with the Chinese so as to gain insights into Chinese identity strategies that ensure financial success and empowerment.

These excerpts from Su Lin, Yoke Lin, Intan and Sharmala’s interview narratives illustrate some of the discriminatory and unfair practices they encounter as young Malaysian women in educational and work places. Examples of such practices include students being differentiated in school, based on their academic achievement, ethnicity and access to public higher education and ethnic preferences in the corporate sector. Their interview narratives also illustrate some of the gender politics in Malaysia where there are traditional societal expectations that young women be feminine, complacent and conforming.

In this book I draw on my longitudinal ethnography over a period of seven years examining the experiences of Malay, Chinese and Indian young women growing up in multi-ethnic Malaysia in the 21st century. My study followed these young women’s educational, social and career trajectories to trace how ethnic politics and social inequalities operating within the Malaysian and global contexts impacted on, and were perceived by them.

Multiple axes of social injustice and hierarchies operate within the Malaysian and global contexts to create different spaces of inclusion and exclusion for young people from different ethnic groups. The socioeconomic or financial backgrounds of their families play an important role in shaping their pathways, especially for Chinese and Indian girls who are excluded from certain educational and economic privileges by affirmative action programmes accorded only to Malays.<sup>2</sup>

Malaysian citizens are required to categorize themselves according to their ethnicity as Malays, *Bumiputera*,<sup>3</sup> Chinese, Indians, or ‘Others’,<sup>4</sup> and their religion as Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Taoists or ‘Other Religions’. In public and official documents such as birth certificates, national identity cards, passports, school records, university and college applications, and applications for bank and housing loans, ethnic and religious categories are constantly invoked. Ethnic categories were introduced with British colonialist practices as a mechanism to manage and control different segments of colonial Malaya (Andaya and Andaya 2001; Korff 2001; Syed 2008). Ethnic and religious categories continue to be deployed by the Malaysian state and ethnic collectives to define the parameters of political, economic, educational and cultural power, and distribute resources within and between the collectives.

Islam, the official religion of the state and the most important political and ideological force influencing the Malays, also plays a crucial role in this ethnoscape. Islam in present day Malaysia is a patchwork of the most liberal as well as radical strands of the religion (Maznah 2006; Ong 1999, 2006). Ong (2006: 33) captures this complexity of ‘moderate Islam’ in the Malaysian context:

The mix of Islamic nation and capitalist culture is reflected by the self-representations of Malay–Muslim women – many in body-conscious [tight-fitting] dresses and jeans, and some in full *pardah* (veil) in the streets, workplaces and leisure centers.

The symbols of Islam are prominent features of sociocultural, economic and political dimensions of contemporary Malaysia. There are the visible symbols of Islam such as the headscarf that Muslim women wear, Islamic architecture and the public call of prayer that is heard five times a day in Malaysia. Islamic spaces such as prayer rooms are common in government office buildings, schools and university departments. Islamization is also present in other aspects of Malaysian life where one-third of the population are non-Muslims. Islamization refers to the inclusion of Islam in governance and everyday life through the power of law (Maznah 2012). For example, there are 29 Islamic financial institutions in Malaysia’s banking system and Islamic banking deposits constitute 10.5% of the total assets of the entire banking system (Chong and Liu 2009). In education, there is the International Islamic University of Malaysia which opened in 1983, and the establishment of a second Islamic university in 1998, *Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia*. This International Islamic University is sponsored by eight governments from the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). There is also a bureaucratization of Islam through Islamic institutions such as the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Department of Islamic Development. Islamic legal texts such as *Syariah* laws, Islamic Banking Act and Islamic Insurance Act also exist alongside secular legislations. This Islamic legal bureaucracy reinforces the Muslim–non-Muslim divide and acts as a visible ethno-religious Malay–Muslim marker in the Malaysian context.

The numerical dominance of the Malay–Muslims representing 63% of the population brings with it political power, while the Chinese at 25% of the population have a high degree of economic power. These forms of dominance act as a mechanism for these two major ethnic collectives to power and profit share in Malaysia (Maznah 2008). Indians (approximately 7% of the population) and ‘Others’ (1%), generally do not occupy any significant positions in these networks of power. However, there are always exceptions to these general patterns when it comes to individuals and specific social sites.

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/non-Bumiputeras*

#### 4 Introduction

and the ethnic collectivities 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. Ethnic and political labeling and daily living experiences are intermeshed with each other. The articulation of these collective and personal experiences results in multiple, shifting and contradictory ways of being Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others in contemporary Malaysia.

Young Malaysian women in my study are located within contemporary Malaysia, which has undergone major social and economic transformations since independence in 1957. Capitalist transformation, rapid expansion of industrialization processes, trade liberalization since the 1980s and development have resulted in the emergence, growth and expansion of a multi-ethnic middle class (Embong 2006; Rahimah 2012; Stevens 2006). Malaysia is also in the 'game of global capitalism' (Ong 2006: 81) with government policies prioritizing economic development, economic capitalism, entrepreneurialism and the free market. In the midst of these rapid social changes, the different ethnic and religious collectives including Malay-Muslims, Chinese, Indians, Hindus and Christians place much importance on nourishing ethno-religious principles and values such as cultural and religious festivals and traditions, religious practices and communities. Mosques, Christian churches, Hindu and Chinese temples exist alongside icons of hyper-economic and technological development and global consumerism, such as the famed *Petronas* Twin Towers,<sup>5</sup> Kuala Lumpur City Centre, the Multimedia Super Corridor,<sup>6</sup> multinational corporations (Sony, Free Scale, Western Digital) and massive shopping malls.

At the same time, there are issues of inequality at play in present day Malaysia. Malaysia has managed to reduce poverty in recent years, yet income inequality has widened. In 2009, the personal income shared by the lowest 20% in Malaysia was 4.5% of the national total and that shared by the highest 20% was 52% (World Bank 2010). Marginalized and exploited groups in Malaysia include the *Orang Asli*,<sup>7</sup> poor non-Malay *Bumiputeras*, poor Malays, and Indians, poor Chinese and migrant workers.<sup>8</sup>

Malaysian women's positionings within social, educational and work spaces in some ways have developed in accord with national economic developments. Malaysia has moved from an agricultural economy during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, to a manufacturing-based and service-oriented economy. The nation now aims to move from an upper middle income to a high income economy by 2020. However, ways of being Malaysian women are not changing in a linear process; rather they are located within the interplay of colonial legacies, nationalist struggles, postcolonial politics and globalization.

With regard to gender, women in Malaysia are encouraged to participate in the labour market. The labour force participation rate of women increased from 37% in 1970 to 44.5% in 2000 (Elias 2009; Ng *et al.* 2006). The participation rate of women in the labour force is currently 46.1% (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011). There has been a marked increase in the number of

women employed in the professional and technical occupations from 7.7% in 1980 to 23% in 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011), due in large part to the over-representation of women in the teaching and nursing professions (Subramaniam 2011). A gap still persists between men and women in the top administrative and managerial positions. Women in Malaysia still face the double burden of being productive workers and citizens in the global economy and at the same time having to negotiate traditional expectations as mothers, wives, and family roles as carers and homemakers (Elias 2011).

The 22 year old young Malaysian women in my study (as with most Malaysian youths) have also spent a large part of their lives as students – six years as primary school pupils, five years as secondary school students and approximately three to six years in post-schooling educational institutions. In the Malaysian education system, a student spends about eight 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 curricula. Students then choose elements from such codes and mix them with ideas that are derived from their own background and 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 and outside the schooling environment.

Various researchers have theorized schooling as a significant site for processes of identification (Giroux 1983, 1997, 2001; Joseph 2003, 2006; Shain 2000). 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 result from major social discourses like those of gender and ethnicity. The Malaysian school (and other public education institutions) is one where the state's public discourse of a democratic and just education system intersects with the ethnic politics as well as the daily experiences of being a student within the school. Students have to negotiate these discourses as well as those of the ethnic and religious collectives of which they are members. I shall provide a more detailed discussion of schooling as an institutional practice in Chapter 2.

The Foucauldian notion of discourse is an important concept in this book. Discourses inhere in structuring principles of society, in social institutions, modes of thought and ways of being. Discourses are the categories through which we perceive the world. For example, the official discourses of ethnicity prevail in Malaysia, where each Malaysian is categorised as *Bumiputera*, Chinese, Indian or Other. Other examples include different codes for ways of being women within the particular ethnic collective. These codes include normative and traditional discourses of ethnicized femininities such as being a good, pious, feminine Muslim girl or a traditional Indian girl. Discourses of



femininity as advocated by ethno-religious communities focus on women's socially reproductive responsibilities as mothers, wives, carers, nurturers and carriers of the collectivity's 'honour' and as its intergenerational reproducers of culture. There is also the Malaysian state's economic discourse on Malaysian women that emphasizes Malaysian women's 'productive capacities as workers and citizens'. Discourses shape and create meaning systems that impinge upon how we define and organize 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).

Young Malaysian women are constantly juggling multiple social and personal roles. In the Malaysian context, they would be located within multiple subject positions as teenage girls, as young women; as *Bumiputeras*, Malays, Chinese, Indians; as Muslims, Taoists, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians or affiliates in other religions; as daughters, as school pupils and college and university students, as workers. They also engage with 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 find their way among individual experiences and the social discourses and practices of the various collectivities and institutions they encounter. Each young woman 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 that shifts and is constantly in flux.

The stories of the young women in my study encapsulate the messy and complex interrelationships between material realities and discursive practices as they negotiate gender politics and experiences of being young women, their schooling, post-schooling and workplace experiences, the ethnic politics between the Malay, Chinese and Indian collectives played out at the local and national levels, and economic capitalism and globalization.

In this book, I shall illustrate the interesting and contradictory ways in which young Malaysian women move within and between different ethnic and cultural spaces as they negotiate and construct new femininities and ethnicities, achieve multiple successes (academic/educational, cultural and material/economic) and seek new forms of personal autonomy and agency. These young Malaysian women's experiences also illustrate the wider trend in which young Malaysian women (and men) are engaging with a globalized economy and culture. Through their involvement in global education and labour markets, and global popular culture, young people from Malaysia's three major ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese and Indians – are engaging with new cultural politics in relation to inter- and intra-ethnic dynamics, and moving beyond ethnic and national boundaries as they negotiate global social forces. They represent a new generation of transcultural Malaysian youth.

This book explores the innovative and strategic identity practices of a group of young Malaysian women as they transition from their teenage to early adult years. I look at the ways young Malay-Muslim, Chinese and Indian

women negotiate ethnic and gender politics in the changing local and global spaces of education, work and culture. In the following chapters, I present life experiences of young Malaysian women based on their in-depth interview narratives, and examine how they experienced and made sense of schooling, tertiary education, work and being young women. After completing their secondary schooling in Malaysia, some of the young Malaysian women in my study went overseas for their university education, some went on to Malaysian public tertiary institutions and others went on to study in private educational institutions in Malaysia. A few of them completed diploma courses and went into the workforce. One young woman got married. As young women, they were also thinking of family and marriage. They are also workers and consumers in the global economy.

I examine how these young Malaysian women negotiate the political, cultural and educational expectations they face in their daily lives in order to construct meaningful lives for themselves in the midst of changing political, economic and social relations. While the focus of the study is not on youth consumption and globalization, globalized popular culture, consumer culture and youth consumption are important in their lives as young women. Some of their interview narratives allude to materialism, consumption and the notion of Western girl.<sup>9</sup>

Globalized popular culture includes fashion, food, advertising, and the many facets of entertainment such as music, film, literature and sports. Youth consumption is generally thought to be related to clothing, grooming, music, communication technology (notably the mobile phone) and going out (including consumption of food and drinks) (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006). I provide further discussions of these issues in Chapter 3.

These young Malaysian women embody multiple identity practices. They prepare, they plan, they are strategic, they negotiate (ethnic privilege and politics, gender politics and the politics of education), they manoeuvre, they observe some aspects of tradition and resist others, they move in-between ethnic spaces, they seek financial independence before marriage and they delay marriage. Malaysian girls and young women are strategic and smart thinkers. They express dexterity and resourcefulness in their ways of being. But I do not wish to romanticize their identity strategies. As we shall see in later chapters, young Malaysian women also engage with issues of social inequalities. Different groups of young women have access to different resources and opportunities that result in educational, employment, income, wealth and income differentials. Such unequal access to opportunities and resources is related to social stratification and ethnic and socioeconomic hierarchies. It is also connected to larger patterns of power and privilege in Malaysia; for example, to affirmative action policies and successor programmes, ethnic and gender politics, education politics, the new Malaysian multi-ethnic middle class, economic liberalization and economic power. In the Malaysian context, the development and practice of new discourses on identity involve grappling with both subjective and social/structural constraints and possibilities.

**Identity, difference and social discourses**

The focus of this book is on the identity practices of young Malaysian women as they negotiate ethnicity and gender politics in the education, work and cultural spaces. I shall show through young Malaysian women's interview narratives at two points in their lives, at the age of 16 years in 2000 and 22 years in 2006, the interplay of gender and ethnicity in their educational, work and social experiences.

The sociological concept of identity underpins the conceptual framework of this book. Sociologists who work with the notion of identity and difference, including postcolonial theorists and feminists of identity and difference (Brah 1996; Gunaratnam 2003; Mirza and Joseph 2010; Mohanty 2003; Yuval-Davis 1997), posit that identity is simultaneously subjective (experienced by the individual) and constituted in and through culture (the collective). From this perspective, a young Malaysian woman's identity is shaped by multiple discourses but she herself is part of this historicized and fluid process whereby her identity is created (Alcoff 1988; de Lauretis 1986). As noted earlier, 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 organizations and institutions as well as in words (Weedon 1996). 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 organization of family and work (Weedon 1996). 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 concept of discourse is a useful analytical tool to understand how women experience and make sense of their social world within such webs of power (Haw 1998; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Weedon 1996). For example, young Malaysian women as students negotiate discourses of schooling that emphasize academic excellence, leadership, polite manners, being disciplined and keeping to the school rules, and other discourses of schooling that include the pedagogical practices of streaming and academic ranking, the privileging of the sciences over the arts. Young Malaysian women are also negotiating discourses of femininities at the intersections with ethnicity, religion and social class. 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, individuals in society also have agency. There are processes of negotiation and contestation in the interplay of discourses, power and knowledge that constitute and shape our self-identifications.

In Malaysia, the political discourse on Malaysian society is one in which each Malaysian is categorized as Malay, Chinese, Indian or Others and this

official labeling determines certain rights and privileges. Yet as we shall see in the coming chapters in this book, this official discourse on Malaysian identity does not discount the diversity of experiences in being a Malay, Chinese or Indian woman/girl. The experience of being a young Malaysian woman is a relationship between subjectivity and collective experience.

There is a strong sense of ethnic collectivity in 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 been immersed within a particular collectivity would have assumed some of its 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 degree of homogeneity in the self-identifications of members of an ethnic group. As such there are the collective identities of Malayness, Chineseness and Indianness. There is also the political labeling of *Bumiputeras* and the non-*Bumiputeras* that is activated and mobilized in official social, educational and economic contexts as a means of achieving political objectives.<sup>10</sup>

The concepts of power, difference and agency are important for understanding the identity practices of young Malaysian women. The politics of difference, represented through differential access to educational resources and opportunities are intertwined, 'stratified and striated by the dynamic relations and structuring principles of gender, ethnicity, race and class' (Weis, McCarthy and Dimitriadis 2006: 10). Differences are embedded within webs of power. Power is conceptualized as a set of relations and strategies dispersed throughout societies and enacted at every moment of interaction (Foucault, 1980, 1988). Difference is an important concept throughout this book as I peel back the layers of contemporary Malaysia to reveal the interplay of colonialism, postcolonialism and globalization on the social and cultural fabric of present day Malaysia vis-à-vis young Malaysian women's experiences. I refer to 'difference' in this book as difference linked to power and hierarchies, and located within intertwining social dimensions such as gender, ethnicity and class (Brah 1996; Mirza 2009; Mohanty 2003; Nagar *et al.* 2002; Yuval-Davis 1997). Thus there are different ways of being a young Malaysian woman and these identities are both privileged and marginalized in different contexts in different ways.

Linked to this notion of difference, is agency. Notions of individual agency have always to be distinguished from notions of free will. Scott (1992) argues that subjects are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will; rather they are people whose agency is created through the situations and statuses conferred on them. Agency here refers to personal and collective agency through individuals' or groups' engagement in the practices, discourses and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning and affect) to the events of the world.

The concept of positioning is important in understanding identity practices – and indeed in understanding agency. I am also interested in the ways these young Malaysian women position themselves and are positioned within their community, schooling spaces, education contexts, workplaces and at the national level. Positioning refers to how one (including young Malaysian women) locates oneself and is located within different social contexts; for example, in the family, community, school, workplace, nation (Mirza and Joseph 2010). Young Malaysian women are not only women, but also have ethnic and religious identities; they are also students, daughters, workers and members of different communities. 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; Mirza and Joseph 2010; Yuval-Davis 1997). The notion of intersectionality is important here, with intersections of gender with other forms of social division and inequality (including ethnicity and class). The focus of this book is on gender and ethnicity (and to a lesser extent social class). By locating the experiences of young Malaysian women at the intersectionalities of cultural, social and economic processes at the global, national, community, household and personal levels, we are able to understand the ways these young women are engaging with the different processes that bump against each other and how these affect their lives.

### **Researching young Malaysian women**

When using a postcolonial analysis to understand young Malaysian women's identity practices, as is the case in this book, it is important to examine these young women's experiences using a multidimensional, historicized analysis of gender and ethnicity at the local, national and global levels, and to illustrate how these young women negotiate structures and processes in ways that can be both empowering and disempowering in their daily lives. I draw on these three principles of analysis underpinning a postcolonial approach as I research young Malaysian women's identities in contemporary multi-ethnic Malaysia.

Postcolonialism is not a chronological and linear unfolding of time and place (Mirza and Joseph 2010). Nor does the formal dismantling of colonial rule indicate the end of colonialism, given that the institutional and intellectual legacies of colonialism tend to be reproduced in the present (Mamdani 2007). Postcolonial theory shows how social, educational, political and economic practices continue into the present and are thus a form of neocolonial globalization (Ahmed 2000; Rizvi *et al.* 2006).

My first principle is that in adopting a postcolonial approach to understanding the identity practices of young Malaysian women, it is imperative to historicize these women's identity practices in terms of the ways that the past (historical and colonial contexts) has meshed with present circumstances to

shape their present experiences and the present social hierarchies as well as the educational, work and cultural institutions they are located within.

Postcolonial researchers also alert us to the problematic of representing subjugated histories and subjectivities (Soudien 2008). They ask questions about the source of historical knowledge and are concerned about the representation of local and indigenous knowledge (Spivak 1988). In this respect, I draw on the works of Malaysian and Asian scholars to contextualize the interplay between the past and the present in understanding the contemporary educational and social politics young Malaysian women navigate as they construct their identities (for example, Chong 2005; Joseph 2009; Lee 2012; Maznah 2007, 2012; Nagarajan 2004; Ng *et al.* 2006; Rahimah 2012; Syed 1981). Postcolonial theories, feminist theories of identity and difference, and critical education theories also provide me with useful concepts (such as agency, power, resistance, social justice) to make sense of the cultural complexities of growing up female in postcolonial and rapidly modernizing Malaysia.

A second principle of inquiry is the need for a multidimensional analysis of the phenomena being researched (young Malaysian women's identity practices) to explain the relationship between personal experiences with politics and practices at the local, national and global levels. For example, in understanding young Malaysian women's identities in the schooling context, I look at how national education and economic policies, including affirmative action policies and ethnic politics impact on the local school culture and these young women's access to educational and career opportunities. I also look at how aspects of popular culture through media representations of the teenage girl shapes these young women's identities. I relate young Malaysian women's experiences and identity practices to the national, local and global discourses. Young Malaysian women negotiate with multiple discourses operating at these different levels and shop around for different strategies as they craft their own quilts of multiple and shifting identities. Their self-identifications are more than the sum of the parts and have a structural base as well. Not only do they negotiate ethnicized social identities but also the different social and institutional structures in quilting their ways of being.

Soudien (2008: 18) notes the importance of the global 'grounded in the local and the urgency of the interests of the local', emphasizing that 'post-colonialism seeks to have the global always in its sights'. Such an analysis brings to light the complexities of power, discourses and ideologies operating across these various scales. This approach traces the ways in which particularities of places and lived experiences intersect with processes of globalization (Katz 2001). A nuanced understanding of the interactions brings to light the practices of inclusion/exclusion and marginalization/privileging that individuals negotiate in their daily lives. Individuals are embedded in social relations of gender, class, race and so on, as well as having to negotiate global processes in their daily lives.

Adams (2002: 13) notes that a conceptual framework is required to understand the link between personal lives, social structures and global forces in

researching contemporary globalization, a framework ‘that connects experience with institutional analysis, context with pattern, process with event, present with past and future, and power with wealth, knowledge, opportunity and political praxis’. Globalized popular culture, youth consumption, consumer culture, neo-liberalism and the globalized economy intersect with cultural and institutional politics operating at the local and national levels in ways that privilege and marginalize different ethnic groups of young Malaysian women, as we shall see in the coming chapters.

Thirdly, there is a need to bring to light decolonizing or de-imperializing practices and how individual young Malaysian women – and the collectives they are members of – negotiate structures, processes and practices in ways that can be both empowering and disempowering, liberating and exploitative, and transforming as well as reproductive of inequality. It is not simply a case of illuminating power structures and practices that perpetuate inequalities on a number of levels. Rather it is a matter of finding out how people develop ‘identities and strategies that help ... leave constricting neo-colonial ideas and practices behind’ (Hickling-Hudson 2003: 382). Adopting a postcolonial approach entails the pursuit of transformation and liberation aimed at bringing to light new ways of doing, being and knowing in the midst of multiple scales and axes of power.

Postcolonial theory is an intellectual, political and pedagogical project (Young 2001) and postcolonial theorists have a commitment to challenging the discourses, structures, processes and practices that have produced and continue to sustain inequalities, marginalization and oppression. A social justice agenda is imperative in the academic and educational works of postcolonial theorists. While knowledge production through research and education is important, equally important is the agenda for action and social change through its dissemination. An important dimension of this book is the unpacking of the impact of the state-sanctioned affirmative action policies, cultural politics and global social forces on young Malaysian women’s access to education and employment opportunities, differentiated as it is by ethnicity and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The notion of ‘parity of participation’ in relation to distribution and recognition (Fraser 1997, 2008) offers a useful concept for identifying what is just or unjust. Distribution highlights income inequality, exploitation, deprivation, economic marginalization or exclusion from labour markets within nation-states (Fraser 2008), while recognition is concerned with institutionalized and cultural hierarchies and encompasses cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect (Fraser 1997, 2008). Postcolonial theory requires us to go beyond nation-state conceptualizations of (in)justice and to understand how the internal politics of distribution and recognition play out through local histories of colonialism, nationalism and imperialism, and globalization. The focus for this book, then, is on the ways in which young Malaysian women and their communities negotiate economic, educational and cultural relations that challenge and reinforce the perpetuation of social injustice