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List of Acronyms

LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and plus
NEP	New Economic Policy
USA	United States of America
UK	United Kingdom

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Abstract

Based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten gay Malaysian men who have migrated to the Netherlands and/or the UK, this paper aims to explore and analyse the factors contributing to their migration, their expectations for migration, and their lived experiences as gay Asian migrants in the Netherlands and/or the UK. In order to study their migration, I use the concept of sexual migration that refers to international relocation that is fully or partially influenced by one's sexuality (Carrillo 2004: 59). I investigate the particular circumstances and factors contributing to their international migration, relating these factors to Galtung's conceptualization of violence that is not limited to physical violence. In that regard, I am attempting to make visible and demonstrate the broader and more nuanced violence experienced by gay Malaysian men in - and even out of - Malaysia. Next, I discuss participants' lived experiences as gay Asian migrants in the Netherlands and/or the UK, and also consider their personal reflections on migration as a way of offering a more complete account of their migration, as well as to emphasize the importance of sexuality in relation to migration. Using an intersectional approach, this research also considers the ways in which participants' lived experiences have been shaped not only by intersections of oppression, but also that of privilege.

Relevance to Development Studies

It is encouraging that increasingly, development projects and development studies are paying more attention to the inclusion and rights of marginalized groups, including but not limited to gay communities. This paper analysing the lived experiences of gay Malaysian men aims to contribute to the growing research in the area of sexuality vis-à-vis development studies. Additionally, by exploring the ways in which these men can be subject to violence, I am also offering a more nuanced understanding of violence that is not limited to physical violence.

Keywords

Sexual migration, violence, intersectionality, gay, Malaysia, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Galtung

Chapter 1

Introduction

A few years ago, I came to the Netherlands as a second-year undergraduate student for an exchange program. As a young gay person who was only then coming to terms with my sexuality, I harboured sexual desires that I was eager to explore, without any intention of a long-term relationship - I was to return to Malaysia anyway, to finish my studies and later, to involve myself in the cause on fighting for LGBTQ+ rights in Malaysia. If gay Malaysians left to seek sexual freedom and rights somewhere else, then who will fight for such freedom and rights in Malaysia? I wanted to bear some of that responsibility. But then, in my short time in the Netherlands, I fell in love.

Certainly, love prompted a personal reassessment. Long story short, I went back to Malaysia to finish my studies and while studying, I got involved in advocacy on matters related to LGBTQ+ inclusion and community building. I also had a “gay” life, so to speak - I went to gay bars, I had gay friends, and I was openly gay to many of my friends. Now, I am back in the Netherlands, having realized my migration for reasons including love, educational growth, as well as to establish some physical distance from my parents. I do not have any immediate plans to return to Malaysia, hoping instead to work and continue living in the Netherlands after my studies.

Some of the key questions that inspired my research were: Why do some gay Malaysian men leave and what does this say about Malaysia and particularly, its treatment against gay men? These thoughts were fueled by my personal lived experiences and an unfortunate lacuna in academic research. There has been no academic research done concerning the migration of gay Malaysian men. In fact, generally, the emigration of Malaysians and Malaysian diaspora seem to have received little academic attention and on top of that, existing research did not explore sexuality matters or rather, how it matters.

This research is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten gay Malaysian men. These gay Malaysian men have migrated to and are (at the time of the interview) living in the Netherlands and/or the United Kingdom (UK). The use of ‘and/or’ is because a few participants had lived in both countries and hence, drew experiences from both. The choice to focus on the Netherlands and the UK was for practical and strategic reasons. Essentially, it was due to time constraints and limited personal funding, but it was also strategic in the sense that there is officially by law, respect and protection of gay rights in these countries, which is in stark contrast with Malaysia.

In order to analyse and understand migration of gay men from Malaysia, I use the concept of sexual migration that refers to international relocation that is fully or partially influenced by one’s sexuality (Carrillo 2004: 59). Probing research participants about their lived experiences as gay Malaysian men in and out of Malaysia, I consider the particular circumstances and factors that have led to their international migration. Specifically, I situate factors contributing to their migration in the context of violence against gay Malaysian men, using the conceptualization of violence by Galtung. By demonstrating the ways in which gay men in Malaysia are subject to violence, I am suggesting a broader understanding of violence that is more nuanced and not limited to physical violence. Then, I explore their lived experiences as gay Asian migrants in the Netherlands and/or the UK, and also consider their personal reflections on migration to offer a more complete account of their migration, as well as to highlight the importance of sexuality vis-à-vis migration. Throughout my research, an intersectional analysis is used to consider not only the intersections of oppression, but also that of privilege.

In this paper, I will first provide a relevant background on Malaysia, the Netherlands, and the UK. Next, the research method and methodology guiding this research will be discussed, followed by an explanation of the theoretical concepts used in my analysis, namely sexual migration, violence, and intersectionality. Subsequently, I will discuss and analyse the contributing factors to my research participants' migration and then, explore their lived experiences as gay Asian migrants in the Netherlands and/or the UK, as well as their personal reflections on their migration.

1.1 Background

In this section, I will discuss the relevant background in Malaysia, particularly on issues related to race, religion, and politics, which have significant implications for gay men in Malaysia. Next, I will describe the relevant background in the Netherlands and the UK, which would be especially focused on immigration, race/racism, Islamophobia, and gay rights.

1.1.1 Malaysia

Malaysia is composed of 13 states and three Federal Territories (MyGovernment n.d.). According to the 2017-2018 Current Population Estimates by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2018), the population in Malaysia was estimated at 29.1 million in which the Bumiputera group constituted the majority (69.1 percent). Bumiputera (in English, 'sons of the soil') is a "state-created term" that refers to ethnic Malays and "natives of Sabah and Sarawak" (Shah 2018: 135, 311; Balasubramaniam 2007: 35). The other ethnic groups mentioned and included in the population estimates are the Chinese (23.0 percent), Indians (6.9 percent) and Others (1.0 percent) (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2018).

Much of the ethnic diversity in contemporary, postcolonial Malaysia can be attributed to the British colonial rule, in which a significant number of people from China and India arrived in what is now Malaysia, to work in tin mines and rubber plantations (Gabriel 2015: 787). Eventually, upon independence, these Chinese and Indian immigrants were granted citizenship (Mariappan 2002: 200 as cited in Shah 2018: 111). Gabriel (2013: 1211-1212) argues that despite having existed for a long time in Malaysian society, the Chinese and Indian communities are perceived implicitly by the State as "outsiders", not legitimately belonging to the "national community". Furthermore, in contemporary Malaysia, Balasubramaniam (2007: 305) contends that there is a divide between the Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera wherein the former have privileged access to among others, public-sector jobs, educational scholarships, and admission into public universities. Koh (2015: 188) argues that the "special position" of Bumiputera, particularly Malays, was cemented with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, which aimed to "reduce socio-economic disparities between the different ethnic groups" and to "create conditions for national unity" (Jomo 2004 as cited in Koh 2015: 188). It is important to point out that this "special position" of Bumiputera is enshrined in the Federal Constitution, specifically Article 153 and additionally, to question this "special position" is considered under Sedition Act 1948 as a "seditious tendency" ('Sedition Act 1948' 2006: 5; Amnesty International 2016: 11).

Along with ethnic and racial diversity, there is also much religious diversity. Islam is recognised as the "religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony" ('Federal Constitution' 2010: 20). According to the decennial 'Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010' (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011), Muslims constituted the majority of the population (61.3 percent), followed by Buddhists (19.8 percent), Christians (9.2 percent), and Hindus (6.3 percent). The remaining groups were much smaller: "Confucianism, Taoism, and Tribal/folk/other traditional

Chinese religion” (1.3 percent), unknown (1.0 percent), no religion (0.7 percent), and other religion (0.4 percent) (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011). Ethnic/racial identity may also be intimately related to religious identity, which is particularly true for Malay Muslims in Malaysia. In fact, Article 160 of the Federal Constitutions defines a Malay as someone who “professes the religion of Islam” (‘Federal Constitution’ 2010: 153) – such conflation of race and religion does not apply to other racial groups.

Since 1957, the year in which Malaya¹ achieved its independence from the British, until May 2018, the Malaysian Government was led by ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN) (in English, National Front) (Bing 2017: 59-60). Among the multiple parties that make up BN, United Malays National Organization (UMNO) is the most dominant (Bing 2017: 60). Unsurprisingly, UMNO which was formed with the aim to further Malay interests, has a membership that is mainly limited to Malays and hence, has a firm ethnic character (Kaßner 2014: 75, 91). Considering UMNO’s main composition and orientation towards Malay Muslims, UMNO can utilize “the emotional power of ethnicity” (i.e. ethnic sentiments) for mobilization during election campaigns (Kaßner 2014: 77). Malay politics, as argued by Lee and tan (2017: 93), often move into “the register of Islam with rhetoric” frequently relying on “Islamic tenets”. Lee and tan (2017: 99) assert that the State-led Islamization over the past three decades can be largely attributed to the desire to gain Malay voters’ support. This can be described as political Islam, referring to the mobilizing of Muslim to take or hold on to political power (Liow 2007: 184).

Liow (2007: 189) posits that under Mahathir’s² prime ministership between 1981 and 2003, Islam was “brought to the forefront of UMNO and Malaysian Politics”. Lee and tan (2017: 95) argue that Mahathir’s Islamization policy had the effect of centralizing Islam within the political domain and expanding the “infrastructural and legal powers of various Islamic authorities”. Among others, this included the enactment of the Syariah Criminal Offences Act in each state and territory in Malaysia, which “criminalises an array of non-marital and non-heterosexual behavior”, as well as the establishment of the Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) (in English, the Department of Islamic Development) (Lee and tan 2017: 95). JAKIM was “upgraded from a pre-existing body” and included in the Prime Minister’s Department to be responsible for standardizing “Islamic law and administration” (Lee and tan 2017: 95). Generally, this has significant implications for gay men in Malaysia.

For instance, Md Yusof from JAKIM recently claimed that JAKIM has helped or rather, “rehabilitated” 1,450 people from the LGBT community (Mok 2018). Here, it is evident that conversion or “corrective therapies” in Malaysia are State-sponsored, contributing to an environment which encourages discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity (United Nations 2015: 17). In that regard, it is clear that gay rights in Malaysia are non-existent. Same-sex sexual activities continue to be criminalized under the Penal Code Act 574 (2018: 209-210), specifically Section 377A, 377B and 377C. This criminalisation under Section 377 that deals with “unnatural offences” is a legacy of British colonial rule (Hoffstaedter 2015: 134). Additionally, there are also Sharia laws in most states criminalizing *limat* (anal sex) or more generally, sexual relations between smale persons (Human Rights Watch 2014). This indicates the dual legal system in Malaysia, wherein Muslims are subject to both federal criminal law and state-level Sharia laws, while non-Muslims are only subject to the former (Human Rights Watch 2014; Hoffstaedter 2015: 134). Furthermore, there is also

¹ Malaya became Malaysia in 1961 with the union of East Malaysia (Malaya) and West Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), as well as Singapore which seceded a few years later.

² Interestingly, Mahathir is currently the Prime Minister of Malaysia - again - after leading the Pakatan Harapan (PH) (in English, Alliance of Hope) coalition to victory in the 2018 general elections, defeating Barisan Nasional for the first time in Malaysia’s history.

much repression and opposition against LGBT activism, which I will describe in the next chapter. In short, I conclude that there is no respect, promotion and protection of gay rights in Malaysia.

1.1.2 The Netherlands

The Netherlands, according to Maas (2014: 256), has always been a “migration state”. This can be traced back to the seventeenth century when immigrants played significant roles in forming the Dutch state and the Dutch Golden Age (Maas 2014: 256). In more recent times, it has been reported that in 2010, one in five people in the Netherlands was an immigrant or a child of one (Maas 2014: 256). Immigration to the Netherlands in more recent times, particularly from the twentieth century, can be largely linked to postcolonial immigration from Indonesia, Suriname, and the Netherlands Antilles, as well as to labor migration, significantly from Turkey and Morocco (Maas 2014: 264). It is also important to note the rising importance of immigration from other European Union (EU) member states, especially after 2004 (Pool 2011 as cited in Maas 2014: 264).

The Netherlands has been described as a “reluctant immigration country”, which can also be said of other Western European states (Entzinger 2004 as cited in Maas 2014: 258-259). In 2014, Bloemraad (277) wrote that over the past decade, the immigration and citizenship policy in the Netherlands which was considered to be relatively open, has moved towards “greater exclusion and assimilation”. Additionally, by the end of the 1990s, asylum policy had also turned to become undoubtedly less welcoming (Van Selm 2000 as cited in Maas 2014: 270). A significant figure related to this change in attitude is Pim Fortuyn (Maas: 2014: 270). In his book published in 1997, he warned that “Muslims living in the Netherlands were a threat to traditional Dutch values” (Maas 2014: 270). Such a perspective can also be traced back to Frits Bolkestein, a right-wing political leader who in 1991, called Muslim immigrants “a huge problem for the Netherlands” and warned of the incompatibility between Muslim values and Dutch culture (Essed and Hoving 2014: 17).

Pim Fortuyn’s argument was that because Muslim culture had not been through “modernization”, it lacked acceptance for *inter ali*, gay rights (Essed and Hoving 2014: 17). Though he was later assassinated by a Dutch environmental activist (Maas 2014: 270-271), his “anti-Muslim rhetoric” was arguably continued by among others, Geert Wilders (Essed and Hoving 2014: 17). In the words of Hekma and Duyvendak (2011: 113) populist politicians such as Fortuyn and Wilders “have all used gay rights as a stick to beat Muslims”. This political climate is indicative of homonationalism, which in the Dutch context, refers to how the Dutch nation is linked with “sexual freedom”, while Muslims are perceived to be “oppressive and intolerant of (queer) sexualities” (Jivraj and de Jong 2011: 145). In that regard, homophobia is portrayed as “peripheral to Dutch culture”, where secular liberalism is associated with sexual freedom and liberty, set against “the allegedly backward – and perilous – ‘cultures’ of immigrants, especially Muslims” (Mepschen 2016: 83).

Undeniably, there has been much positive progress in terms of gay acceptance and rights. Meerendonk and Scheepers (2004: 64) contend that for a significant part of the twentieth century, homosexuality was perceived by Dutch society as “a sin, a disease, or a crime”. However, by 2001, most discriminatory elements against lesbian and gay men were removed from Dutch legislation (Meerendonk and Scheepers 2004: 64). For instance, the General Equal Treatment Act in 1994 included ‘homosexual and heterosexual orientation’ in “existing articles on discrimination” (Mattijssen and Turksma 1998 as cited in Meerendonk and Scheepers 2004: 76). Registered partnership for same-sex couples and same-sex marriage have been legalized respectively in 1997 and 2001 (Hekma and Duyvendak 2011: 104). Besides that, the Netherlands was also the first state to officially recognize gay individuals as eligible for refugee status on the basis of sexual orientation (Dunton 2012: 358).

1.1.3 The UK

I will focus on immigration to the UK beginning from the post-World War 2 period. With a focus on labour migration, Messina (2007: 107) describes three parts of migration starting with the recruitment of workers from mainly Eastern and Southern Europe in the 1940s and early 1950s – many, if not, most of whom were “encouraged by the government” to “settle permanently in Britain”. The second part coincided with the introduction of the 1948 British Nationality Act granting special status to Irish citizens (Messina 2007: 107). The third part is immigration from the New Commonwealth, specifically India, Pakistan and the West Indies – this migration process was also aided by the 1948 British Nationality Act, which conferred British Commonwealth citizens the right to work and live in Britain (Messina 2007: 108). Later, restrictions to immigration were enacted with the passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 and by that time, the consensus of the Conservative and Labour parties was that “strict controls” on immigration were both “desirable and necessary” (McLaren and Johnson 2007: 711). In general, between the 1970s and 1990s, little primary immigration took place, as work permits were begrudgingly issued by the government (Hansen 2014: 201). Besides that, during that period, asylum seekers were also said to be “almost non-existent” (Hansen 2014: 202).

Hansen (2014: 199, 202-203) notes a “migration surge” in the UK after 1997, with the Labour Party coming into power - more work permits were issued, together with the implementation of changes related to skilled and unskilled migrant workers, as well as the granting of entry rights to A8 nationals, referring to those coming from the 2004 European Union (EU) accession countries, excluding Malta and Cyprus. Additionally, there was also an increase in asylum seekers (Hansen 2014: 202). This however does not suggest that the UK became friendlier and more accepting of asylum seekers, but rather as a result of other European states instituting restrictions and hence, essentially, the UK was just like “any other nation in terms of unwanted immigration” (Hansen 2014: 207).

Ford (2011: 1020) contends that in Britain, different groups of migrants have been met with very different reactions from the public - non-White immigration has faced far more opposition than White immigration. This to some extent, indicates that racism exists and persists in the UK. Due to the word limit, I am unable to adequately discuss racism in the UK in great detail. Therefore, I will focus on Islamophobia and more broadly, racism within the gay or wider LGBT community in the UK. In short, anti-Islam and anti-Muslim in the UK is not too different from the Netherlands. Islamophobes in contemporary Britain, Linehan (2012: 378) posits, demonstrate a “strong ethnocentric cultural animosity” against Muslims that is rooted in the notion that Muslims are not only different from the majority Christian community, but also “fundamentally incompatible and antagonistic”. Additionally, with the 9/11 events and 7/7 London attacks³, “dangerous new ingredients” were added to the anti-Islamic discourse wherein the Muslim is seen as a “religious extremist” and a “terrorist” who posed a threat not only to national security but also, to Western liberal democracy (Field 2007: 465 as cited in Linehan 2012: 377). Unsurprisingly, this would have consequences for Muslims in the UK, including gay Muslims.

In a paper written by Jaspal (2016: 178), a number of participants expressed the belief that White gay men had inaccurate assumptions regarding Asian culture, and more and more about Islam. This can be related to the context of rising Islamophobia in the UK (Allen 2010

³ Also known as the 7/7 bombings or 7/7, this refers to bombings that happened in London on 7 July 2005, which resulted in the death of fifty-six people, with several hundred others injured (Hussain and Bagguley 2012: 715). This event has been described as a significant event “shaping the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain” (Hussain and Bagguley 2012: 715).

as cited in Jaspal 2016: 178). Importantly, Jaspal (2016: 182) points out that while in non-gay contexts, homophobia amounted to a potential threat resulting from “invisible difference” (sexual identity), in gay contexts, the “more pressing and inescapable threat” is racism, resulting from “visible difference” (ethnic/racial identity). This is consistent with other reports exploring racism within the LGBT community in the UK. Recently, research by Stonewall, a charity for LGBT equality in the UK, found racism to be widespread among the LGBT community, in which half of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people reported to have experienced “discrimination or poor treatment from the wider LGBT community” (Stonewall 2018). Similarly, another survey found that 81 percent of East and Southeast Asian men, and 86 percent of South Asian men reported having “experienced racism on Britain’s gay scene” (Haggas 2017).

In terms of gay rights, it is undeniable that the British State has improved significantly - a transformation from criminalization and stigmatization of homosexuality to the protection of it “as a human right” (Shah 2018: 129). Particularly, the late 1900s to early 2000s period witnessed an array of reforms in relation to sexuality, such as the removal of ban on lesbian and gay individuals to serve in the armed forces, the equalisation of the age of consent, the abolition of the provision of ‘gross indecency’ in the Sexual Offences Act, and the introduction of the civil Partnership Act (Cook 2007a: 212-212; Weeks 2002: 406-407 as cited in Shah 2018: 128). Equal marriage was later introduced, coming into effect in 2014 (Shah 2018: 128). Though there have been improvements in relation to the formal rights for LGBTQ+ individuals, accompanied by support for such rights, there have been increasing restrictions on the right to claim asylum and asylum seekers’ entitlements (Dustin 2018: 107). In relation to gay individuals, it had been widely accepted since 1999 that they are eligible to claim asylum (O’Leary 2008: 88). However, problems persist for reasons including but not limited to having to “prove” one’s sexual identity and country reports that frequently lack information on the situation for lesbians and gay men (O’Leary 2008: 88, 92). Furthermore, prior to 2010 when there was a landmark ruling against ‘discretion’, asylum claims were frequently denied on the basis of ‘discretion’, that is to suggest that a person can return to their country of origin, conceal their sexual identity and consequently, avoid persecution (UKLGIG 2013: 11 as cited in Kan 2018: 63). Nonetheless, despite this landmark ruling and other “international rulings and guidance”, Dustin (2018: 112) contends that this ‘discretion’ thinking is still applied by the UK authorities.

1.2 Research questions

In what ways do the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, religion, and class shape one’s migration and particularly, if and to what extent does sexuality influence migration decisions?

Sub-questions:

1. How do the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, religion, and class shape gay Malaysian men’s lived experiences in Malaysia and abroad (i.e. the Netherlands and/or the UK), and subsequently, their migration decisions?
2. In what ways can the lived experiences of gay Malaysian men be described and understood as violence?
3. What are the expectations that gay Malaysian men had about their life abroad and, if and to what extent have these expectations been matched by their lived experiences?

1.3 Research method and methodology

In order to gather the data required for this research paper, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten gay Malaysian men in the Netherlands and/or the UK. The method of in-depth interview which uses research participants as “the point of departure” is based on the premise that individuals or more specifically, research participants have unique and critical knowledge that can be shared via verbal communication (Hesse-Biber 2017: 106). Guided by feminist epistemology, through in-depth interviews, I acknowledge and affirm the epistemic advantage of my participants as knowledge producers. According to Narayan (1989: 336), feminists have contended that it is more likely for groups living through oppression to have critical insights on their situation. Considering gay Malaysian men as an oppressed group and recognising their epistemic advantage suggests an acknowledgement and serious consideration of their lived experiences (including their emotional responses towards their life situations) for knowledge production and a commitment to “the contextual nature of knowledge”, that is the oppressed have an epistemic advantage over those living outside such structures of oppression (Narayan 1989: 337)

Feminist writers have advocated reflexivity as a “strategy for situating knowledges”, to avoid – or I argue, challenge – the “false neutrality and universality of so much academic knowledge” (Rose 1997: 306). Here, I find it necessary to describe my positionality vis-à-vis my research. I am a gay Malaysian Chinese man from Kuala Lumpur who is currently studying in the Netherlands with plans to continue living here after my studies. On paper, I am identified as a Buddhist, though I do not identify with any particular religion. I would describe my parents as conservative, though not in a strictly religious way. Their reaction to my coming out was not particularly hostile, but it was not affirmative – in short, they expressed their hope that I could change, that is to be heterosexual. Here, I find comfort – and maybe solidarity – in these words by Fountain-Stokes’ (2008: 294): “I want to say that I live (or love) in *sexile*⁴ but I don’t know what that means. Would it be more accurate to say that I live in family exile: that I love away from my family?” Loving (and living) away from my parents might be rooted in the fear of rejection, but there is also the consideration that perhaps, this is how my relationship with my parents can continue. Or maybe I am just scared and making excuses?

The criteria for selecting participants were that they had to be or have been a Malaysian citizen, identify as gay, and have migrated to and been living in the Netherlands or the UK for more than six months. I also included participants who have lived in either country for more than six months, but on the condition that they are currently residing in the Netherlands or the UK. Preferably, my interviews were to be conducted face-to-face, though this was only achieved with five participants. The other five were conducted through an online video call which was mostly due to financial and time constraints. During interviews, I asked my participants a number of questions relating to the main areas of my research, giving them time to express and articulate their response. I probed only when additional information or further clarification was required. Every now and then, I shared my personal lived experiences with them, which I also considered as a way of establishing mutual trust. As all participants spoke English fluently, interviews were conducted almost entirely in English – though in rare instances, a few Malay or Cantonese words were used, which I was able to understand. Interviews ranged between 50 minutes to over two hours.

⁴ Briefly, the term *sexile* refers to a form of exile on the basis of sexual orientation (Guzman 1997: 227) – this term will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

At the start of an interview, I would briefly describe my research and highlight the key areas of my research, as well as seek their consent to audio-record interviews. I also shared with them what will happen to my final paper, particularly where it would be published and also, who I intend to share it with. I offered anonymity as an option to all participants, which most preferred. Two participants however, agreed to have their names published. Hence, in this paper, all names are pseudonyms, except for Shanon and KG Krishnan.

An interview guide was prepared and used during interviews. The guide included a number of questions, though the order and phrasing of questions may differ depending on the interview (King and Horrocks 2010: 35). I designed the guide based on secondary data and by reflecting on my personal experiences (King and Horrocks 2010: 35). My interviews aimed at gathering relevant personal information and exploring the factors that contribute to participants' migration (particularly, if and how their sexuality shapes their migration), their expectations for migration, as well as their lived experiences as gay Asian migrants in the Netherlands and/or the UK. I transcribed the interviews as verbatim as possible (excluding small talk that I considered as irrelevant to research) and offered to share them with participants. Based on these transcripts, I formulated particular themes and sub-themes, and then grouped my findings accordingly, as a way to facilitate my process of analysis.

I used a few different methods to recruit research participants. Firstly, I shared my research and invited participants by posting on Facebook groups, particularly LGBT-related groups that are based in Malaysia and whose members are predominantly Malaysian. Secondly, I contacted a number of organizations and groups involving LGBT communities that are based in the Netherlands or the UK. Besides that, I also contacted friends who I thought might know potential participants. Lastly, I used snowball sampling, recruiting 'new' participants recommended by those who had been interviewed (King and Horrocks 2010: 34). I was able to gather a fairly diverse group of participants, specifically in terms of age, race, and religion or rather, their "assigned" religion in Malaysia – most participants no longer follow any religion. All participants at the time of interview, were living in or near major cities.

Overall, it was a challenge to recruit participants who were interested and willing to be interviewed. I also felt demoralized when a few potential participants (mostly recommended by other participants) directly or indirectly refused to participate but whose decision I respected. As mentioned by Ballamingie and Johnson (2011: 715), participant access is not an entitlement but rather, a privilege – this made me feel all the more thankful to those who agreed to participate.

Chapter 2

Theoretical concepts

2.1 Sexual migration

While the exact figure of Malaysia's diaspora is difficult or rather, impossible to obtain, Hugo (2013: 2097) asserts that it surely exceeds over one million people. A significant number of Malaysian-born migrants living abroad are in the neighbouring country of Singapore, while to a lesser extent but in nonetheless sizeable figures, others live in countries such as Australia, Brunei, the Philippines, USA, UK, Indonesia and Canada (Hugo 2013: 2097). The Malaysian diaspora is composed predominantly of people of Chinese ethnicity and to a lesser extent, people of Indian ethnicity (Joseph 2013: 29). In her book, adopting a postcolonial approach, Koh (2017: 257) contends that the "culture of migration" of "mobile Malaysians" has to be contextualised in relation to the legacies of British colonialism, inherited and aggravated by the postcolonial Malaysian state.

Under the British colonial administration, a number of interventions were implemented including but not limited to "large-scale ethnicised labor migration", the policy of 'divide-and-rule' and "the materialization of race and Malay indigeneity", which resulted in racially defined and segregated communities (Koh 2017: 257). Consequently, these conditions were further exacerbated by the postcolonial Malaysian State, through *inter alia*, affirmative action implemented through the NEP and other subsequent policies (Koh 2017: 257). The NEP, according to Koh (2015: 188) led to "significant emigration of Chinese- and Indian Malaysians". Similarly, Joseph (2013: 29) contends that the significant factor underpinning Malaysians' emigration is their discontentment with the NEP. Essentially, Koh (2017: 257) asserts, it is this domestic context that forms the 'push factor' for the migration of mobile Malaysians.

This domestic context, referring to the 'push factor(s)', has yet to include sexuality in relation to migration. As suggested by Asencio and Acosta (2009: 35), until recently, sexuality has to a large extent remained unexplored as a factor that has an influence on migration. Although there are no studies on the (sexual) migration of gay Malaysian men, there have been a few reported cases in the media about gay Malaysian men who have migrated, in which their sexuality figures prominently in their decision to migrate. I will briefly describe them below, as a way of introducing the concept of sexual migration, exemplified by these men's migration.

In 2011, Ariff Alfian Rosli, a Malaysian person in Ireland previously thought to be missing was found after his marriage to his Irish husband (Garcia 2011). Prior to his "discovery", he had stopped contacting his family (Asiaone 2011). Husin and Kaos (2011) reported that most posts on Facebook and Twitter about the wedding were condemnatory. Little else is known about him except that he arrived in Ireland on a scholarship to study medicine and after news broke about his marriage, he said, "returning home under the current situation is untenable... as I fear for my safety there" (O'Brien 2011).

Another story is on Hazim Ismail, an "openly gay and atheist student" in Canada who became a refugee (CBC News 2016). After his family learnt that he was gay and atheist, they reportedly disowned him and stopped funding his education - and so, he resorted to a GoFundMe campaign (CBC News 2016). He mentioned that he considered going back to Malaysia and attempting to live an "undercover life" but after the media attention on his case in Malaysia, he began to get homophobic comments and threats (CBC News 2016). In his words, he was "backed into a corner" (Middleton 2016), suggesting that he had no other option but to stay out of Malaysia.

There is also the story of Julian Sanjivan. A few years ago, after attending a US State Department-sponsored program in the USA, he sought asylum and was eventually granted asylum in 2015 (Vilensky 2016). In an interview, he shared a particular experience of police harassment in Malaysia: “I was surrounded and harassed by a group of policemen who pointed a gun to my face and threatened to use it for merely voicing my rights” (Azlee 2016). He claims that his decision to continue staying in the US was made after hearing that authorities were cracking down on LGBT rights movements in Malaysia (Azlee 2016). Moreover, he explained that he did not choose to remain in the US to escape discrimination, but rather he had a mission to raise awareness about the plight of the LGBT community in Malaysia (Azlee 2016).

Similarly, Hans How hopes to from afar advocate for change in Malaysia (Teeman 2018). He first arrived in the USA on a scholarship to study but more recently, he has become a refugee claimant (Teeman 2018). In an article published on the Daily Beast, How recounts his experience of harassment and physical assault by gang members, followed by police harassment, who not only threatened arrest but warned that if jailed, he could be killed (Teeman 2018). Also mentioned in the article was the abuse How experienced from his parents to “correct” his behavior (Teeman 2018). His school teachers also reportedly suggested to his parents that he, who was at that time between 7 to 9 years old, would benefit from attending a “conversion camp” (Teeman 2018). More recently, after an editorial he wrote was published on an online news website, he believes that this led the police to his family’s house in Kuala Lumpur “to look for him” (Teeman 2018). On the prospects of deportation to the Malaysia, How is said to be “terrified” for his life if that were to happen (Teeman 2018).

In relation to the cases described above, I posit that these men’s migration can be considered and discussed as sexual migration that is consistent with the Carrillo’s (2004: 59) conceptualization and definition of sexual migration, which refers to “international relocation that is motivated, fully or partially, by the sexuality of those who migrate”. Motivations can include factors related to “sexual desires and pleasures, the pursuit of romantic relations with foreign partners, the exploration of new self-definition of sexual identity, the need to distance oneself from experiences of discrimination or oppression caused by sexual difference, or the search for greater sexual equality and rights” (Carrillo 2004: 59). In that regard, I posit that with the inclusion and consideration of a wide range of motivations, the sexual migration framework acknowledges and incorporates the ‘sexual turn’ and ‘emotional turn’ within migration studies. In relation to the former, this means recognising that migrants or ‘people on the move’ are sexual beings with desires to express their sexual identity, and the latter refers to recognising and positioning emotions, particularly love and affection, at the centre of “migration decision making and behaviour” (Mai and King 2009: 296).

Yue (2013: 2061) posits that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) migration is “synonymous” with the sexual migration framework. However, this is not to say that sexual migration is necessarily limited to non-heterosexual individuals. Parker (1997: 67-68) suggests that sexual migration is a broad category including women and men, regardless of sexual orientation, that corresponds to a wide array of factors. Nonetheless, same-sex sexuality stands out as a significant issue to understand sexuality and migration because of its “lesser” status (social and legally) in comparison with heterosexuality (Asencio and Acosta 2009: 35).

Sexual migration may also be referred to as queer migration, particularly in connection with “a process of ‘queering’” that is the “disruptive nature” of bringing non-heterosexual identities into migration discourses which are “presumptively heteronormative” (Lewis 2012: 213). Besides that, queer in this context can also refer to the umbrella category for a spectrum of LGBT identities (Yue 2016: 213). It is in this context that I suggest my research on sexual migration can also be referred to as queer migration, though undeniably the concept of queer migration is broader than sexual migration. Generally, the queer studies approach not only

challenges the “heteronormativity of most migration scholarship and policies”, but furthermore it transcends the binary of “heterosexual and homosexual normativities” (Mai and King 2009: 298). Considering that my research does not challenge or transcend this binary, I rather use the term sexual migration.

Another related concept that has already been mentioned is ‘sexile’, which is a neologism by Guzman that refers to “the exile of those who have had to leave their nations of origin on account of their sexual orientation” (Guzman 1997: 227). Here, I assert that sexile and sexual migration are not the same, particularly because sexile more strongly implies a situation in which one *has* to leave due to their sexuality. In contrast, the concept of sexual migration is more neutral, concerned with exploring how sexuality may - in varying degrees - motivate one’s migration. In that regard, sexile may be a type of sexual migration, but sexual migration is not limited to sexile.

A crucial consideration integral to exploring and understanding sexual migration is not only how sexuality influences one’s migration, as in to leave and relocate from one country to another, but also how sexuality may affect one’s decision or possibility (in the case of State persecution) to (not) return to Malaysia. As Asencio and Acosta (2009: 34) learnt from their research on the migration of Puerto Rican sexual minorities to the USA, while for most study participants, “sexuality was not the reason they left Puerto Rico, but it was a factor in their decision to not return”. Hence, in this research, using the concept of sexual migration, I investigate not only how sexuality may have influenced the departure of research participants from Malaysia, but additionally, how their sexuality was a factor that encouraged or even compelled them to stay abroad and not return to Malaysia.

Before proceeding, I concede that the cases of sexual migration of gay Malaysian men briefly described above appears to paint a very bleak picture of Malaysia in which migration may not only seem appropriate but perhaps, even necessary. I situate these negative experiences amidst and in relation to violence against gay Malaysian men, which I will elaborate later. However, inspired by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), I find it crucial to present and affirm a clarification or caveat of sorts, which is that while such violence exists, one should not insist only on negative stories and disregard other stories that shape a person. To do so is to insist on a single story, to “make one story become the only story” (Adichie 2009).

2.2 Violence

Violence, according to Galtung’s definition (1969: 168), is “the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual” or in other words, “between what could have been and what is”. For instance, in relation to gay men, it could be said that the potential is the freedom to be themselves, expressing their sexuality, while the actual is being forced to hide their sexuality. Galtung (1969: 168) adds that violence not only increase the distance between the ‘potential’ and the ‘actual’, but also prevents any decrease in this distance. To illustrate this point, Galtung (1969: 168) states that if one was to die from tuberculosis in the eighteenth century, this would hardly be perceived as violence as it might have been at that time quite unavoidable, but if it were to happen today with all the medical resources in the world, then violence can be said to be present. In present times when gay rights are available, including but not limited to decriminalization of same-sex sexual relations, equal rights to marriage and/or same-sex partnership, and generally, anti-discrimination laws, I contend that such respect, promotion, and protection of human rights represents the potential, while the absence of such represents the ‘what is’, that is the reality lived by gay men in Malaysia.

Importantly, I posit that Galtung’s conceptualization of violence is useful for it suggests an understanding of violence that is not limited to physical or direct violence, but also highlights and considers structural and cultural violence. Structural violence is said to be “built

into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (Galtung 1969: 171). Physical or direct violence suggest that an actor can be seen to commit violence, but for structural or indirect violence, there may be no such recognizable actor (Galtung 1969: 170).

Structural violence in the context of Malaysia is rooted in heterosexism, which according to Herek (1992: 89 as cited in Eldrige and Johnson 2011: 383), is an ideological system which not only denies but also stigmatizes any form of non-heterosexual “identity, behaviour, relationship or community”. In relation to that, to be heterosexist is not only to assume that everyone is heterosexual, but also to “suppress and silence” others who do not conform to heterosexuality (Cranny-Francis et al. 2003: 20). Moreover, integral to heterosexism is heteronormativity or heteronormativisms, which refers to unquestioned assumptions about gender binary and “naturalized heterosexuality” or rather, institutionalized compulsory heterosexuality (Winker and Degele 2011: 55). Homophobia can also be considered as another form of structural violence, wherein homophobia refers to not only a hatred against homosexual subjects, but a strategy to discipline all social subjects to make sure they adhere to “society’s preference for heterosexuality” (Cranny-Francis et al. 2003: 25).

In essence, heterosexism, heteronormativity and homophobia are built into the structure, resulting in continuous violence against gay men, which may even go unquestioned. Reiterating Galtung’s definition of violence as the distance between the actual and the potential, and as that which obstructs this distance from decreasing, it is not difficult to see how this occurs in the context of Malaysia. For instance, the anti-sodomy law, inherited from the British, criminalising same-sex sexual relations remains enshrined in the Penal Code, accompanied by Sharia laws in most states criminalising sexual relations between male persons. It is also crucial to highlight that activism for gay or more broadly, LGBT rights has faced and continues to face severe repression and opposition from the Malaysian government. An infamous case would be the banning of Seksualiti Merdeka in 2011, an annual festival to discuss issues related to sexual and gender diversity, on the grounds that it was against section 298A of the Penal Code, constituting a “threat to public order” (Human Rights Watch 2011).

Another aspect of violence described by Galtung is cultural violence. Cultural violence can be understood as “an overarching set of beliefs” in any particular culture that are utilized to legitimize and/or justify theories and behaviours which are damaging to other groups within that culture (Galtung 1990 as cited in Eldrige and Johnson 2011: 385). In other words, such beliefs amount to violence that maintains the distance between one’s actual and potential, preventing one’s potential from being realized. In that regard, cultural violence can take the form of ideology and religion or rather, particular interpretations within religion (Galtung 1990). Eldrige and Johnson (2011: 385) posit that Galtung’s work on cultural violence (1990) suggest that “institutions within a given culture develop rules, laws, and norms based on the assumptions and beliefs of the culture”. As a consequence of a system that is culturally violent, direct and structural violence may appear or even “feel, right – or at least not wrong” (Galtung 1990: 291, Eldridge and Johnson 2011: 386).

2.3 Intersectionality

Intersectionality was a concept introduced by Crenshaw (1991: 1244) to indicate the various ways race and gender interact to “shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s employment experiences”, with the aim to demonstrate that ultimately, it is insufficient to consider race and gender dimensions separately. Since then, the concept of intersectionality has been developed to consider dimensions not just limited to race and gender. According to Battle and Ashley (2008: 3), intersectionality can be used to understand the ways in which categories such as “race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect” creating experiences that are unique,

depending on one's social location and "complex relationships of power and oppression". These interrelated categories are influenced by "both macro systems (institutional) and micro systems (individual and psychological)" (Weber 2010: 91-92 as cited in Ramsay 2014: 455).

Intersectionality has been defined as "particular forms of intersecting oppressions" (Collins 2000: 18 as cited in Crisp 2014: 109). However, in this research, I will choose to adopt a broader definition that not only considers the way in which research participants are oppressed, but also the ways in which they have privilege (Crisp 2014: 110). Privilege may take different forms and contexts (Coston and Kimmel 2012: 109). For instance, White gay men may have race and gender privilege, but will experience marginalization due to sexuality (Coston and Kimmel 2012: 109). In this research, the categories that will be explored are sexuality, gender, race, religion, and class, and to a lesser extent, body.

Chapter 3

Factors contributing to migration

In this chapter, I will specifically identify and analyse the particular circumstances and factors that have shaped my research participants' sexual migration. Using an intersectional analysis, I highlight and demonstrate "some of the structural, social, and cultural" aspects that condition their lives (Howe et al. 2008), situating their lived experience amidst the violence against gay men in Malaysia – and even, outside of Malaysia. In this chapter, I will organize my discussion into three main sections. In each section, I will first summarize how and to what extent participants relate to the particular factor and subsequently, focus on a few select narratives.

3.1 Education, *but...*

I will begin by discussing education as a contributing factor. This may be appropriate considering that for most of my participants, the starting point of their migration was for reasons related to education. It is important to note that it is generally not uncommon for Malaysians to study abroad, a privilege that is afforded to those who can pay for it or those who are able to secure a scholarship. The notion of 'education, *but...*' suggests that while one migrates for education which is not uncommon, education may not be the only reason for migration. In relation to participants, this could mean that migration for education was from the start intertwined with sexuality-related reasons or that while sexuality may not be at the start, a factor for migration, it may become a crucial reason for one to not return to Malaysia. This brings into the picture institutionalized aspects of heterosexism, heteronormativity and homophobia, the role of the State, and the entanglement between government and religion with serious consequences for gay Malaysian men.

Syahir

Syahir received a scholarship from the Malaysian government to study in the UK. Before studying and living in the UK, he claims that he was unaware and indifferent about his sexual identity. He was only focused on his studies. It was only after arriving in the UK in his early 20s that he started to "discover" his sexuality and began "experimenting". Towards the end of his studies, uncertain of his next steps, he went back to Malaysia, in order to find out if he could "tolerate" and live "the kind of life" in Malaysia. But he realised that for himself, this entailed concealing his sexuality. In that regard, his temporary visit to Malaysia can be described as a 'scouting trip' to assess the feasibilities of return migration (Lewis 2012), in which he later determined was not favourable due to his aspirations and desires as a gay man. The impending possibility of return migration and his 'scouting trip' led to a personal assessment (Lewis 2012: 221), shaping his migration decisions, including applying for asylum.

In relation to his professional career that is dependent on the government due to his scholarship, he fears that if his sexuality was known, career progression would not be possible. Additionally, he claims there is tough competition in his area of work in Malaysia. In that regard, he also fears the prospects of unemployment that would then strip him of any coping mechanism. It is as if to say, not only would he be unable to be freely and openly gay, but he would also be unemployed, which might make his overall situation worse. Syahir also tells

me about a meeting with a government scholarship officer just a few months after his ‘scouting trip’ to Malaysia, which motivated him to start his asylum application. During the meeting, the officer “hinted” at Syahir’s sexuality, adding that as Muslims, there are certain things that can or cannot be done. Drawing a distinction between what is *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden), the officer suggested that Syahir would have to fight his *haram* urges.

Something like that. And I feel like I have been brainwashed at that time, and this is not the kind of environment that I want to be in. So that motivates (me) to start applying for asylum.

The meeting speaks to a kind of physiological violence in the form of brainwashing or indoctrination that aims to “decrease mental potentialities” and to restrict human action (Galtung 1969: 169-170), essentially preventing Syahir from realizing his potential. He applied for asylum and was subsequently granted a refugee status a couple of years ago, a decision in which the threat of persecution was said to be the most influential factor. Prior to applying for asylum, he applied for jobs in the UK but was ultimately unsuccessful as employers were unwilling or unable to do what it takes to hire a foreigner.

All things considered, he then applied for asylum as he saw no other way of staying “out of Malaysia”. In relation to asylum, Syahir points primarily to the Malaysian State and highlights the threat of persecution as the most significant factor. More specifically, he refers to provisions that criminalise same-sex sexual activity and the Sharia laws in which only Muslims are subjected to. As a Malay-Muslim in Malaysia, Syahir is necessarily subject to the Sharia laws, even though he no longer identifies as a Muslim. It is also important to mention that applications for leaving Islam are extremely controversial, with significant difficulties and social stigma for those attempting to do so (Samuri and Quraishi 2014: 507). Essentially, Syahir’s sexual migration can be considered as leaving the violence and sexual oppression in Malaysia that is made more complicated by his mandatory Islamic identity, for “greater sexual equality and rights” in the UK (Carrillo 2004: 59).

Walter

Almost three decades ago, Walter arrived in the UK on a government scholarship to further his studies, without any plans of staying on. However, after a chance encounter with a fellow Malaysian in a gay bar and subsequently, an anonymously signed letter sent to his parents and the Ministry of Education in Malaysia containing claims or rather accusations about his homosexuality and conversion to Christianity (from Islam), his life plans changed.

Upon receipt of the letter, his mother constantly called him to ask him whether he was gay, which he consistently denied. Yet his mother did not believe him and he felt that it was almost as if he was forced by his parents to come out, which he did not want to do. Therefore, he changed his number to avoid contact with his parents. Besides that, he was also called to attend a meeting with the Malaysian authorities, where they confronted him about the accusations made in the letter, reading every line and asking him for confirmation. They also mentioned that if the accusations were true, his scholarship would be stopped, which it did. He found out that his scholarship was cut when he was about to start his final year of university but could not do so because his tuition fees have not been paid. Therefore, he was unable to complete that degree. Till today, he claims that the government still asks him to return the money he owes them for supposed breach of contract.

As mentioned above, given the pressure from his parents, Walter changed his number to avoid any contact. One fine day, he contacted his sister and was told that his mother was unwell in the hospital. He decided to go back to see her and eventually found out his mother

had already passed away. When he met his father in the house, he had a presumably life-changing event:

(...) he asked me to leave because I don't know, he shouted at me, he said that because of me, because of my sexuality and everything, my mom died and to say that I murdered my mom.

After that encounter, he recalls saying to his sister that, “there’s nothing here for me anymore” and subsequently, went back to the UK where he eventually applied for asylum, that he received a few years later. The institutions of the State and the family are implicated in Walter’s migration, by reinforcing homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormativity, leading to *inter alia*, the psychological violence of being accused for his mother’s death and the violence through “unequal life chances” to education on the basis of his (homo)sexuality (Galtung 1967). In that regard, it can be said that Walter’s sexual migration is tantamount to a sexile, having to leave Malaysia because of his homosexuality and the ensuing violence he faced from the State and his family. Similarly, his sexual migration is also motivated by a search for “greater sexual equality and rights” in the UK (Carrillo 2004: 59).

Aiman

Aiman is currently a student in the UK on a scholarship from the Malaysian government. He admits that much of his motivation to study in the UK can be linked to his self-awareness of being gay and knowing that Malaysia is “not really a good place to be in”. In that regard, he has always aspired to be “the perfect student”, which according to him, comes from perhaps, his insecurities about his sexuality or rather, his desire to leave Malaysia that can be fulfilled through an education abroad. Additionally, he suggests that his academic excellence “has always been the number one mask” to protect himself from any criticism or attack against his identity.

I rather orang panggil I pandai than panggil I pondan⁵ (I rather people call me smart, than call me a sissy or fag)

He shares his experience of being called a *pondan* in high school by a group of boys, which he describes as “quite a traumatizing experience”. When he was called a *pondan*, he recalls feeling a kind of “visceral humiliation” and disappointment with himself, which led him to “butch it up” in order to avoid being called *pondan* again. He also tells me that when he was around the ages of 10 or 11, he learnt through Islamic studies in school that homosexuality was a sin which “carried a lot of penalty” and hence, he should suppress it. This sentiment persisted and he hated himself for being gay throughout his high school years (13-18 years old). As a consequence, he asserts that he internalized homophobia, to be a good Muslim and a good student, as well as to distance himself from homosexuality by putting on a façade that is, “I am not gay, I am homophobic”. His internalized homophobia was also utilized as a defence mechanism.

It was almost as if this internalized homophobia that we had to do was for our own safety, don't you think?

⁵ Aiman suggests that *pondan* has the similar effect of the slur ‘fag’ in the UK and in the United States.

In that regard, internalized homophobia as a defence mechanism not only maintains the distance between who Aiman is (actual) and who he could be (potential), but only prevents the distance from decreasing. His statement of internalized homophobia for his safety also suggests latent violence against gay men in Malaysia, that is constant and widespread fear that “violence can readily occur” against gay men (Galtung 1969 as cited in Logie et al. 2016: 351). Reflecting upon his racial and religious identity in Malaysia, that is Malay and Muslim (by default), he posits that this makes it “extra hard” to be gay.

(...) it's that double whammy of being a Muslim plus being a homosexual at the same time.

Having been an excellent student, Aiman still downplays the prestige of his scholarship by saying that it is commonly granted to Bumiputeras in Malaysia. As a Bumiputera, Malay and therefore, Muslim (though he is a nonbeliever) person who is gay, Aiman is both privileged and oppressed at the same time. He is privileged for his racial identity, but faces oppression for his sexual identity, which is arguably further complicated by his mandatory Muslim identity that is institutionalized by the Malaysian State as being incompatible with a gay identity. His experiences suggest a sexual migration in which his motivations appear to be a desire for greater sexual freedom and rights, as well as to distance himself from “experiences of discrimination or oppression caused by sexual difference” (Carrillo 2004: 59).

3.2 What's love got to do with it?

Among a few of my research participants, love was described as being *the* motivation or more frequently, a motivation to migrate - whether this means to relocate elsewhere to continue the relationship, or to remain in the Netherlands or the UK after the completion of studies in order to continue the relationship. This is especially relevant for at least four participants. According to Mai and King (2009: 296), love for a partner is frequently a crucial factor in the desire and decision for migration to another country where it is possible for “one’s feelings, ambitions and expectations” (in relation to sexual, economic, political, etcetera) to be lived “more fully and freely”. This is true and largely relevant to these research participants whose narratives will be discussed in this section, namely Azri, Jonathan, and Shanon.

Azri

Azri has been living in the Netherlands for a few years, having migrated to be with his partner. He asserts that his migration was not due to his sexuality, but rather to continue his relationship with his Dutch partner, who was asked by his company to return to the Netherlands. In his own words:

(Did I move to the Netherlands because I'm gay?) I don't see that. I really see it (as) I want to continue my relationship with this guy, that's my main motivation.

Prior to moving to the Netherlands, Azri was already living with his partner for two years in Kuala Lumpur, which he describes as “everything was fine”. However, he comments that in comparison with the Netherlands, in Malaysia, he and his partner were not “really free” to hold hands in the streets. One has to be careful, he adds. Once, while walking around Kuala Lumpur holding his partner’s hand, he was stopped by the police who asked him for his ID and other questions, as well as saying to him that he has “forgotten” (in Malay, *“lupa dah ni”*) as a consequence of hanging out “too much with White people”.

The comment by the police that Azri has “forgotten” suggests he has forgotten who he is or rather, who he should be – that is to be heterosexual. Moreover, the comment that his homosexuality was a consequence of spending too much time with White people also serves to reinforce the (mis)perception of homosexuality as a Western “product” or value that has no place in Malaysian society. This (mis)perception is arguably rooted in the notion of “Asian values” that stipulates Western values (i.e. homosexuality) are to be rejected, in order to assert the superiority of Asian nations over Western societies that have been “debased” by homosexual (and transsexual) identities (Ng 2012: 118). Such an ideology serves as an example of cultural violence against gay men that subsequently legitimizes the literal policing of Azri’s sexual identity. The violence by the police on the personal level in this sense can also be perceived as an “extrapolation of the structural violence” against gay men, where the police are “called into action by expectations deeply rooted in the structure” (Galtung 1969: 179), reinforcing and upholding heteronormativity and homophobia.

Nonetheless, Azri maintains that he is open to the idea of returning to Malaysia in the future, as he and his partner love Kuala Lumpur. However, for now, he would want to stay in the Netherlands to establish his drag career. In that regard, his sexual migration that was motivated primarily by his relationship with a foreign partner, has taken on an additional dimension that is his professional development.

Jonathan

Jonathan has been living in the Netherlands for almost two decades now, where he migrated to be with his Dutch boyfriend who he met through an online dating website. His reason for migration at that time was because of love and his boyfriend who sponsored his visa. While he describes love and his boyfriend to be the reason for his migration, it is important to note that this reason was intertwined with other factors. Firstly, despite his achievements, he was not happy with his career and his work environment. Secondly, he had an exclusive preference for White men (“I like White men, I don’t like Asian”).

That’s a motivation, freedom and doing, you just go to the direction (where you can be) happier. You know that route will bring more (happiness) and then, you know more stable (life) (...) I was so not myself. I was so lost. And then like everything in Malaysia, people got girlfriends, people got this and that. I don’t want this. It’s not what I want, you know. Trying to get a girlfriend to become normal.

In addition to love as the reason for migration, his statement quoted above reveals that he left also because he was unhappy, lost, and not himself. He adds that at that time, he was just going with the flow. However, as he shared briefly about his friends who moved to the Netherlands because they needed to “escape”, I inquired if there was any element of “escape” in his migration. He posits that “escape” was a component in his migration decision, suggesting his “escape” from the responsibility of having to marry a woman and having a child, as well as “escaping” from the “invisible stress” caused by his parents’ occasional fights.

I need to run away from those things bothering my life. It’s all also part of the issue, (the) reason (for migration).

Furthermore, he asserts that in Malaysia, he cannot be himself and that he has to live “in the closet”. He relates this to being Chinese, as he posits that among Chinese people, the family name and reputation are considered to be extremely important. In relation to that,

being gay is described as “being abnormal”, which can taint one’s family name. Additionally, there is the expectation of the responsibility to look after one’s parents when they are old and “give them happiness”, a mentality that he claims to be “very strong” in his mind. This mentality then prevents him from living his life as an openly gay person in Malaysia.

(...) if I open that I’m gay, people will look, (and think) Jonathan’s family is sick, they have one son (who) is gay.

In short, while his sexual migration was primarily motivated by his relationship with his Dutch boyfriend (who he later separated with), it was also shaped by a strict racial preference for White men, search for sexual freedom, and a desire to escape expectations of heterosexuality from his family. Besides, his migration can also be said to be influenced by a motivation to “protect” his family name and to avoid hurting his family, which was possible by being gay away from Malaysia. In that regard, Jonathan’s case speaks to a kind of cultural violence that devalues and stigmatizes homosexuality and gay men, with repercussions not only on gay men themselves but also their family.

Shanon

Shanon who has migrated to the UK also points to love as a contributing factor to remaining in the country. A few years ago, he was awarded a scholarship to do his Master’s in the UK. He met his partner during that time and after the completion of his Master’s studies, he realised he wanted to continue his studies and stay with his partner. Therefore, he decided to do his PhD in the UK. Shanon is of a mixed ethnic background and the only research participant who identifies as Muslim. His partner is an openly gay Anglican priest. After completing his PhD, he applied to remain as a spouse and continues to live in the UK.

(...) migration for me has become about love... To be with a man that I love.

While love is central in shaping his migration (i.e. to remain in the UK and not return to Malaysia), there is also the element of work or rather, work opportunities that is taken into consideration. He almost jokingly tells me that he does not think there are many vacancies for an openly gay priest in Malaysia, while in the UK, “there are openings for Muslim social scientists”. Here, I posit that while love was the primary contributing factor for Shanon’s residence in the UK, there is also the aspect of economic consideration.

Interestingly, for Shanon, while sexuality plays a role in shaping his migration decision about remaining in the UK, he had been more troubled with his sexuality when he was a student in Australia and thought of running away and not returning to Malaysia. This was around the time of Anwar Ibrahim’s case in 1998, when he was sacked from his position as the Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister and later charged for sodomy and corruption (Abbott 2001: 285). Shanon however, eventually returned to Malaysia from Australia and later got involved with NGOs such as Amnesty International and Sisters in Islam⁶ (SIS). He describes his return as “the best thing” because of the positive impact it had on his relationship with Malaysia.

⁶ Sisters in Islam (SIS) is an NGO that aims to promote “an understanding of Islam that recognizes the principles of justice, equality, freedom, and dignity within a democratic nation state” (n.d.).

Regarding the role of sexuality in influencing his residence in the UK, he responds that it is significant to the degree that he does not want “to keep having to look over” his shoulders. An additional dimension would be the inter-religious nature of his relationship, which would make his life in Malaysia “very difficult”. Furthermore, he comments that his family is “very relieved” that he is in the UK with his partner, citing their worry about the potential consequences, with emphasis on the fact that his partner is a Christian priest. In that regard, his family presumes that the UK is “the best place” for Shanon and his partner. Here, I posit that his family’s tacit or open acceptance of his partnership in the UK, as well as their fear for his life if returned to Malaysia, may have also helped in creating the conditions for his sexual migration (Carrillo 2017: 78).

3.3 Family pressures

Finally, I focus on the family and family pressures as a contributing factor to one’s migration. In this section, I will discuss KG Krishnan and Michael’s narratives.

KG Krishnan

When I interviewed KG Krishnan, he had only been in the Netherlands for slightly more than two months - but he had also previously lived and studied in the UK. Among the contributing factors to his migration are his longing to live freely without any need to constantly “explain or defend his sexuality”, to be with his Dutch partner, and his search for “queer intellectual stimulation”, which he felt was either no longer accessible or rather, constrained in Malaysia. He was also concerned with risks of “getting arrested” or “being shut down”. I asked whether there was a link between his family and his migration, which he responded:

I think at the subconscious level, I did believe that being at such close proximity to my family would come with the burden of possibly not being able to fully live the life I desire or the full potential of my life as a queer person. And this distance would allow it.

While KG Krishnan is out to his parents, they have not met his partner. In fact, when I asked about it, he tells me no, while raising a finger gun to his temple as if to suggest such meeting would be suicide. Earlier in the interview, he shares a story of how his mother specifically avoided talking about his partner, as well as more generally about his sexuality. He claims that when they choose not to approach the aforementioned topic, they are actually attempting to avoid a particular phase in his life when he was practically disowned by his parents for being gay.

In his final year of university, KG Krishnan spent his summer break in Malaysia. During that period, one day, his mother confronted him about his sexuality. He came out to her and was then asked to leave the house. Described as an institutional vanguard of “the politics of the straight line” (Ahmed 2006: 555 as cited in Bong 2011: 661), the family naturalizes and makes compulsory heterosexuality, by “offering rewards for compliance and withdrawing rewards for non-compliance” (Bong 2011: 661). In KG Krishnan’s case, non-compliance of heterosexuality resulted in not so much of withdrawing of rewards, but rather severe punishment in the form of psychological violence. He left his family’s house and did not have any contact with his parents for three years. Terrified in those years, he considers himself lucky that he had extremely supportive friends. In his words, his ordeal was “the perfect premise” for queer teenage suicide.

Besides these factors, KG Krishnan also discusses his status as a HIV-positive person and relates this to his expectation for migration, that is to get health insurance. As a HIV-

positive person, he was unable to get health insurance in Malaysia. While he could access public hospitals, he has experienced discrimination due to his status. KG Krishnan's case also brings into the picture the intersection of body (i.e. health status) (Winker and Degele 2011), which is a key element in his experience of structural violence in Malaysia. Essentially, KG Krishnan's narrative reveals a sexual migration that is influenced by a number of factors, such as the desire for academic stimulation, sexual freedom and rights, including the right to healthcare as a HIV-positive person. The lack of the aforementioned factors due to State restrictions exemplify the violence faced by gay men in Malaysia.

Michael

Michael first arrived in the UK as a student more than 30 years ago. When he was a pre-teen, he went to another country (not the UK) for his education. He recalls going to the library, as a pre-teen, to read about homosexuality and then, finding out that "homosexuality was an illness to be treated" and if it did not "go away" by the time one turns 18, one needs to undergo conversion or aversion therapy. Consequently, he thought he would have aversion therapy, in the event that his homosexuality persisted. In fact, conversion therapy is recommended by most Christian churches in Malaysia (Goh 2013, 2015; National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia (NECF) 2013 as cited in Goh 2016: 127)

Around the age of 16, he left to continue his studies in the UK and since then, he has been living in the UK. He suggests that his motivation for his migration, which refers to his decision of staying in the UK after his studies, was his fears about what his life would be if he returned. Particularly, he refers to his fears of being forced to get married to a woman and having to give in to heterosexual marriage. In that regard, he admits that at that time, he did not have the resources or emotional strength to stand up to organized religion and his family who he describes as "very right wing, evangelical Christians".

Furthermore, he talks about his mother's constant scrutiny about when he was to get married, which he felt he could deal with if it only occurred during the holidays when he went back from the UK. Moreover, he also remembers his father's homophobia, expressed through his reaction toward Rod Hudson who had been diagnosed with AIDS. In that regard, his father's "disgust at AIDS and a gay man" made him feel unsafe in his father's presence. In his own words:

(...) if you are not safe with your parents, how can you go back to Malaysia if you are not even safe with the people who are meant to love you the most. How are you safe in a country that is hostile to homosexuality, even when your parents are hostile to it.

Through his remark, Michael draws attention to violence against gay men in Malaysia that is also reproduced in his family. In general, he cites his sexuality and ability to be himself as a huge motivation for his migration. He shares that by the age of 27, he was out to everybody at work in the UK and hence, when considering how easy it was, as well as how happy and free this made him, he knew he could not return to Malaysia which for him meant letting go of this ability to be himself. Besides that, as alluded in his quote above, he also cites the political climate as another factor, particularly Anwar Ibrahim's case (as mentioned by Shanon). Essentially, these factors very negatively portrayed Malaysia as a place that was not safe for him to return to. In short, Michael's sexual migration can be described as staying away from the homophobia in Malaysia and holding on to his sexual freedom in the UK.

Chapter 4

Lived experiences as gay Asian migrants in the Netherlands and/or the UK

In this chapter, I will discuss my participants' lived experiences as gay Asian migrants in the Netherlands and/or the UK. I present the narratives from the standpoint of gay Asian migrants, suggesting the intersections of race, religion, gender, and sexuality, and how these intersections may or may not result in different forms of marginalization emerging from "forms of differences treated oppressively" (Ramsay 2014: 453). For a few participants, racism appears to be a problem, while for others it might be Islamophobia or homophobia. However, not all participants expressed such experiences and instead, highlighted their positive experiences and emotions about their life abroad.

In that regard, it would be useful to also explore the ways in which they have privilege. Generally, I posit two ways in which they all have privilege. Firstly, at the time of interview, all participants have legal residence. Though for two participants, the process of securing legal residence (i.e. refugee status) resulted in a multitude of challenges, which will be discussed later. Secondly, all participants now have a similar class status, that refers not only to socio-economic status but also to the "cultural resource of education and profession" (Bourdieu 1986 as cited in Winker and Degele 2011: 51). Apart from Aiman and Walter, no one spoke of any financial difficulties. Additionally, all of them had or are undertaking some form of university education and/or have a job.

Similar to the previous chapter, in this chapter, I will discuss the narratives of research participants, detailing their lived experiences in the Netherlands and/or the UK, as well as exploring and analysing their personal reflections on migration.

4.1 Finding and being themselves

Walter

After having his scholarship funding cut by the Malaysian government, Walter had to survive on his own. As an asylum seeker, he was entitled to a small amount of stipend. However, he shares that to get by, he had to resort to sex work. He applied for asylum in the mid-1990s and was only granted his refugee status a few years later in the early 2000s. He recalls that at that time, as an asylum seeker, he not only struggled financially, but he also had to deal with the stigma of being an asylum seeker. Hansen (2011: 207) notes that from the late 1990s, "an often hysterical campaign" was launched by the tabloid press against asylum seekers, particularly through publication of lurid stories concerning "scrounging, crime, and welfare abuse".

As a consequence of the asylum seeker stigma and perhaps, Walter's self-stigmatization, he often pretended to be someone else, telling others that he was from Singapore or that he was working in public relations when asked.

(...) 5 years to do all this shit, pretending to be somebody else... it's not very good for you, mentally.

He was embarrassed being Malaysian. Around that time, he had decided to leave Islam because of the people who ruined his life - people who were "Muslim". He then changed what he described as his Muslim-sounding name, to dissociate himself from anything related to religion. He was very angry for what happened to him and so, he strove to detach

himself from Islam, Muslims, and Malaysia. After many years, he no longer subscribes to these sentiments and these days he is a different person who is happy to share about his ordeal.

Apart from the financial and mental challenges of being a refugee, he had to also deal racism or rather, sexual racism. Sexual racism can be described as “discrimination between potential sexual or romantic partners on the basis of perceived racial identity” (Callander et al. 2015: 1991). Being a gay Asian in the UK, he comments that it is not “plain sailing”, specifying that within the gay community, gay Asians are a minority.

The thing like, being Asian is sort of - I don't know, I get stuff like, “I don't like Asians, I don't sleep with Asians”. I don't need all that.

Reflecting upon his migration to the UK, he suggests that it is “90 percent blessing, 10 percent a curse”. On the one hand, it was a curse because it significantly damaged his relationship with his family. On the other hand, it was mainly a blessing because if he had to escape his situation in Malaysia, which he presumes might have entailed unhappiness with having to conceal his sexuality and not being able to live his life fully, job discrimination, or even a heterosexual marriage to hide his sexuality.

Michael

Michael has been living in the UK for over three decades ago. He tells me that throughout his 20s and 30s, he rejected his identities that he considered to be potentially a problem for a gay person, namely his Christian, Malaysian, and Indian identities, claiming to be “more British” than a Brit. Besides that, he also mentions that he had to “strive very hard to be better than the White man” such as passing exams quicker, earning higher scores, and sounding “terribly English at interviews”, which he suggests has brought him success because that is “what they want”. Though over the years as he grew older, he began acknowledging the different parts of his identity, which he tries to integrate in his life today.

He has been together with his partner for more than a decade. In relation to this, he expresses pain and loneliness that his sister and mother did not come to his civil partnership ceremony in the UK. His civil partnership ceremony was on the one hand, an experience that was very affirming and positive but on the other hand, “very terrifying”. He recalls consuming a lot of alcohol and doing a few lines of coke on that day. He shares that he has had a drug problem, which he has received treatment for. In relation to his drug problem, he suggests that he has been on the receiving end of what can be described as a combination of institutional and structural homophobia and racism. For instance, the assumptions that were made against him and his partner when he was ill with his drug problem, assumptions such as that his partner was also using drugs and that they were “all just party animals, having orgies” in their house every weekend.

Generally, being a gay Asian person in the UK, he does not think that it has been easy because of the widespread racism in the UK. Interestingly, he also relates to racism in Malaysia and proceeds to admit that he has been quite racist in the past. He attributes this to prevailing pro-White narratives and his upbringing that put White culture on a pedestal. In relation to that, he admits that the problem has not only been the society, but also himself.

Nonetheless, this does not mean he has not experienced racism. In relation to sexual racism, he has experienced it at bars or on dating apps where others express sentiments such as “I don't go out with Asians, I don't do Indians or Indians have small dicks”. Besides that, he has also been subjected to fetishization (“I really wanted to shag a person of Brown skin”). His experiences denote dominant discourses in White gay cultures that situate Asian men in

two oppositional models that is on the one hand, excluding Asian men as “erotically attractive” and on the other hand, fetishizing Asian men as “objects of erotic interest” (Jackson 2000: 183).

Generally, Michael posits that what he has had to deal with was manageable. In general, Michael’s experiences suggest assimilation which entailed the denial of his other identities such as Malaysian, Indian, and Christian identities, while privileging his gay identity and assuming a “British” identity. These days however, he is giving “more space and volume” for the integration of other identities which he previously rejected.

Syahir

As mentioned earlier, Syahir began exploring his sexuality after arriving in the UK. Facing significant obstacles with employment as a foreigner, coupled with his desire to not return to Malaysia for primarily sexuality-related reasons, he decided to apply for asylum. During the process of seeking asylum, Syahir recalls that it felt very isolating, feeling as if he was cutting ties from Malaysia which was funding his studies, as well as from his parents. Feeling very alone and lonely, he coped by acknowledging that the process would be short-lived. He describes his asylum-seeking process as generally quite good, though at times the interview process was “quite intrusive”. However, thanks to his lawyer, he knew how to respond to personal questions without being too explicit.

His expectation for his migration was to be integrated into the society and to be accepted, which was not a problem in London. However, these days he no longer lives in London and in his new area of residence, he feels as if he is being “looked at” wherever he goes and sometimes, he does not even feel welcome. Generally, being a gay Asian person, he feels quite left out. Additionally, at times, he says he does not feel welcomed.

Because everywhere I go, um, it's like as if they don't want me to be there.

However, he asserts that he does not care about others who do not want him there, adding that, he also does not care if others look at him. Claiming and defending his place, he asserts, “if I want to be here, I’m going to be here. Like who are you to tell me not to be here”. Outside of London, he shares that there are even people who do not like him to sit next to them - and he would talk to them asking “what’s your problem?” He would try to do it in a way that is not confrontational or offensive. When asked if he thinks this is because of his race or his sexual and gender identity, he suggests that it is a combination of both.

I think it's a combination of both, 'cos I start wearing make-up. When that happens, they just look at me like, I don't know. Like I'm a weird (person).

As for his experiences within gay spaces, particularly gay dating apps, I asked if he has received messages along the lines of “no Asians, no fems” and how that makes him feel. He responds by saying that it makes him feel like “a lower class of human being”. Furthermore, he also talks about responses to his messages, in which instead of receiving a simple response expressing lack of interest, the responses he received are offensive, telling him to go back to his country.

These days, he has adjusted his expectations of life in the UK, which is to find what brings him happiness and not care about what others think. Looking back on his migration, he asserts that it was definitely a good decision. He recalls the time before he received his asylum when he was worried every day, unable to sleep and focus on his studies, not feeling

free and feeling as he was going to have to leave someday, and generally feeling stuck in a situation that he cannot get out of. However, after receiving his refugee status, he feels as if he can do whatever he wants, without judgement. Evidently, Syahir's lived experiences in the UK have been coloured by racism and to a lesser extent, homophobia, which has resulted in him feeling at times, left out and even not welcomed. Yet, his unequivocal answer suggesting his migration was definitely a good decision suggests that all such experiences are tolerable because he has the freedom to be himself, without judgment and concern for what others think.

4.2 Contentment with 'new' life

Azri

Azri migrated for love and to continue his relationship with his partner, without any expectations or plans for life in the Netherlands. Since then however, he began getting involved in drag. He was inspired to explore drag, after seeing a poster with an Asian drag queen in the Netherlands. As an Asian drag queen, he considers himself to be unique. Here, it can be said that he considers his Asian-ness as an advantage.

Recognising that there might be problems for gay Asian people in the Netherlands, he asserts that he does not have any personal experiences to suggest that being a gay Asian person is a problem for him. Apart from his one experience of near-assault if not for an intervention of another passerby, his lived experiences appear to be extremely positive. Describing a party of queer people coming together, he talks about how "there's room for everyone" in the Netherlands, where queerness is celebrated and accepted, as opposed to Malaysia where queerness is deemed as "weird" and "unhealthy". He feels less depressed in the Netherlands, which he thinks is because of the freedom that he has to be himself. Generally, it can be said that his contentment with life in the Netherlands is because of the freedom he has to be himself and with the person he loves.

Razak

At the time of our interview, Razak had just finished his short-term course in the UK and was just about to move to another country to pursue his new relationship. Prior to that, he had lived in the Netherlands for a little more than six months – a combination of two periods of short-term stay. Interestingly, he makes a distinction between 'work migration' and 'personal migration', where in the former category, work trumps personal matters, including sexuality. Though he posits that at times, they intertwine, such as when he was in the Netherlands.

He describes his life in the Netherlands as "so comfortable and so memorable" that he felt extremely sad when he had to leave. During his second stay in the Netherlands, he worked with an Islamic foundation that he found to be "surprisingly welcoming". For instance, he mentions that his hijab-wearing Muslim colleagues would also ask him about his love life. Furthermore, he shares that he could also be in a tram with his hijab-wearing Muslim colleague having conversations about guys which he says, "it just feels normal and I don't think I can ever do that in Malaysia". I highlight this also to combat the misunderstanding in the Netherlands where Muslims are seemingly made to be homophobic, that can also be used as justification to restrict (Muslim) immigration.

When asked if he would return to Malaysia, he asserts that he would love to say yes but the answer is no, due to the "law against us", having a public figure status (he fears if his sexuality was known, he would be subject to "witch hunt"), and that he wants to be able to

hold his boyfriend's hand which he knows are not yet possibilities in Malaysia. In short, Razak's very positive lived experiences suggest a life of comfort, security, and ease which was enabled by the freedom to be himself.

KG Krishnan

Having only been in the Netherlands for a few months at the time of interview, KG Krishnan considers his journey to be "surprisingly well". Unlike the UK, in the Netherlands he does not sense that his "Brownness" is an issue within the gay community. While initially, he felt bothered not seeing any gay bars in the town he resides in, he has come to realise that perhaps, "this is it", that is where the separation between gay and straight stops being important or even, needed. Besides that, in relation to his profession, he finds that the environment has been really fulfilling. He asserts that he deeply cares for Malaysia and always will. In fact, the distance has enabled him to retain his care "without being broken by the environment". In that regard, the distance benefits him.

(...) being here (in the Netherlands)... I don't feel any emotional distance from it at all. If anything, it helps me understand the work that needs to be done.

After our interview, KG Krishnan was to return to Malaysia temporarily to complete the legal process to migrate to the Netherlands. Hence, during his time in the Netherlands, he still had to pay for his medication as he could not get the insurance yet. However, this did not bother him because he knew that it would be different in the future. In short, KG Krishnan's lived experiences suggests a happy "new" life that would only be better when he is able to secure his health insurance after completing the legal process to return to the Netherlands.

4.3 Not easy, but...

Shanon

Shanon first moved to the UK for his studies and then, stayed for love. Migrating for love, he asserts that coming to the UK for him was not because he hates Malaysia and that the UK is paradise - which is not the case. In his own words, "I am a brown Muslim man in the UK, who is post-7/7 bombings, it's not easy being Muslim either". A self-identifying gay Muslim man, he also does not want to be the "token gay Muslim". Working with Muslim communities on gender and sexuality, he describes his "fight" with other Muslims as one that is constructive and loving, for inclusion and not exclusion. In relation to that, he notes that there are strands within LGBT activism which can be quite Islamophobic or racist.

Additionally, as a Muslim, he thinks he is very exotic in a lot of spaces that he participates in. In groups wherein the people "want to be nice to immigrants and minorities" but maintain their suspicion about Islam, he feels that when he comes out as Muslim, people do not know where to place him. Besides that, he talks about the micro-aggressions that he faces, such as that which are intertwined with a White savior complex.

(...) it will be things like "oh, you are so brave it must be so difficult, you must be so happy to be here now". And I feel like yes, but not in the way you mean.

Shanon perceives such comments to have the effect of denying him agency, accompanied by assumptions rooted in the lack of recognition that the UK has not always been good about gay rights and additionally, that racism exists and persists in the UK. Consequently, he

is then faced with questions as to why he remains in the UK, if he is so ungrateful. In that regard, he asserts that it is not that he is ungrateful, but rather wherever he is, he will have criticism concerning the injustices happening around him. He highlights the double standard in being critical, where if criticism comes from an immigrant, it can be perceived as “disloyalty”.

In that regard, Shanon’s lived experiences as a gay Asian Muslim migrant in the UK are shaped by struggles with structural racism and Islamophobia. Nonetheless, he is also aware that he has privilege, being a middle-class, English-speaking person with a PhD. Besides that, in spite of his grievances, he mentions that he is able to belong in his partner’s church. Particularly, he describes the church as a kind of “fairytale inclusive church community”, where he can belong without having to change who he is.

Jonathan

Jonathan migrated to the Netherlands to be with his boyfriend, who he eventually separated with. He feels that in the Netherlands, he is an “Asian gay” who is not easily accepted by White gay men because of *inter alia*, different cultural backgrounds. Such differences, coupled with different interests make it difficult for him to connect with White people. In general, he describes feeling isolated that he is neither really in the gay community, nor the wider Dutch community. When I asked him if he has experienced any discrimination as a gay Asian person, he offered a simple, straight-forward response:

Of course... very simple, you (turn) on the Grindr⁷, (you see) no Asian, sorry. (That is) discrimination for me already.

He suggests such discrimination against Asian men as ‘rice-ist’⁸. It is important to recall that Jonathan migrated to the Netherlands for among other reasons, his exclusive preference for gay White men. In that regard, he also practiced the discrimination which he faces and describes. I mention ‘practiced’ because Jonathan no longer has such a preference, but instead has a preference for overall quality including the ability to connect. Nonetheless, Jonathan does not seem to take any offence to such discrimination, suggesting that it is just how things are.

Despite his struggles in the Netherlands, including breaking up his boyfriend who he migrated for and connecting with Dutch (White) people, he does not regret migrating to the Netherlands because he has what he considers to be “the most important thing in life” that is the freedom to be himself, which he claims he cannot have in Malaysia.

Aiman

Aiman is still studying in the UK and has received a job offer, and so he is likely to remain in the UK. As of now, he feels “not so Malaysia, not really UK”, suggesting a liminal state. In that regard, he thinks he would feel more secure when he starts to work and earn an income, which after a few years would enable him to be confident of his place in the UK. During the time of our interview, Aiman was in a situation in which the guarantor for his housing contract, a fellow Malaysian living in the UK, wants to cancel the contract and stop being his guarantor. According to Aiman, this is because the guarantor is “so uncomfortable” with the idea of him being gay and having gay sex in the house. In that regard, while Aiman

⁷ A gay dating app.

⁸ Rice is term or rather, slur for Asian men that is not uncommon on gay dating apps.

has left Malaysia, he continues to face homophobia or rather, violence from Malaysians abroad, restricting his sexual freedom.

Additionally, Aiman's lived experiences in the UK also indicate that to some extent, he still lives in fear vis-à-vis his sexuality and the potential harmful consequences if it were to be known. Specifically, he refers to his online behavior that he describes as "lying by omission", such as about participating in Pride events or dates with his boyfriend. This is mainly because he fears triggering any "warning alarms" because he is on a government scholarship. He finds this to be very difficult, having to hide his sexuality. In that regard, to a large extent, even in the UK, Aiman has to navigate concealing his sexuality in particular contexts (i.e. social media), out of fear concerning the violence against gay Malaysian men. He would consider going back to Malaysia after earning enough money in the UK to pay off his debt and live comfortable. He also has aspirations to bring about change in Malaysia. However, as of now, he does not see Malaysia as a safe place for him to be in with his boyfriend. Life in the UK has not been easy, but he is happy for having been able to do all he wanted to do, such as having his first kiss and being able to more freely explore his sexuality.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

It is difficult to summarize the diverse and complex stories shared by research participants about their experiences vis-à-vis sexual migration. I begin by confirming and emphasizing the influence of sexuality in influencing migration decisions. This was particularly evident in the discussion of the factors that contribute to participants' (sexual) migration. In chapter 3, I investigated the particular circumstances and factors that influenced participants' migration, which includes State persecution against gay men in Malaysia through laws or even threats by particular State representatives, family pressures in the form of expectations for heterosexuality, homophobic environment within the family, experiences of oppression or discrimination due to sexuality, and love for a foreign partner. In that regard, I situated such factors in a context of violence against gay Malaysian men, in or outside of Malaysia, that restricts these gay men from living their lives fully and freely.

In the next chapter, to offer a more account of their sexual migration, I also explored and analysed their lived experiences in the Netherlands and/or the UK as gay Asian migrants. I organized the discussion in three different sections. In the first section on 'finding and being themselves', I discussed three participants' challenges with being themselves in the UK due to challenges emerging from assimilation, stigma against refugees, (sexual) racism, and even homophobia. Here, participants seem to navigate these challenges by either adjusting their expectations or changing their approach to life, such as by reclaiming multiple identities that were previously denied or by ignoring what others may think. In the second section of this chapter, I detailed three other participants' lived experiences that suggest contentment with their 'new' life in the Netherlands, which included feeling accepted and the freedom to be themselves. In the following section, I discussed three participants who on the one hand, struggle against homophobia, Islamophobia and/or general feelings of isolation, and other hand, suggest contentment with new experiences and also, the freedom to be themselves.

In conclusion, by exploring sexuality as a factor in migration decisions, I have determined that sexuality indeed plays a significant role, suggesting that sexual freedom and rights are extremely important. This is also illustrated by their lived experiences in the Netherlands and/or the UK, where they face challenges but which are seemingly tolerable and manageable because they have the freedom to be themselves and/or to be with their partners. By highlighting the importance of such freedom and rights, through comparison with Malaysian context where such freedom and rights are severely restricted, I have also attempted to demonstrate and make visible the ways in which gay Malaysian men experience violence.

Below, I describe some of my key limitations and challenges, as well as offer three suggestions for future research.

5.1 Limitations and challenges

One limitation in this research is the time and financial constraints, which made it difficult to gather a more diverse group of participants. While there was indeed diversity among my participants, this was still largely lacking. For instance, all of my Malay participants except for Shanon, do not identify as Muslim. This limitation made me unable to explore how participants navigate their experiences with Islamophobia in the West.

A main challenge faced during this research was my vulnerability as a researcher. As a gay Malaysian man myself, many times, I was emotionally and mentally affected by the stories

shared by participants. Besides that, I also decided to withhold information about my research with my parents, fearing their disapproval or outright rejection. Generally, these distressed me every now and then which I was not quite prepared for when I embarked on this research project.

5.2 Suggestions for future research

1. Research investigating the lived experiences of gay Malaysian men who have lived in another country with gay rights but then for one reason or another, had to return to Malaysia.
2. Research exploring if and to what extent gay Malaysian men harbour hopes for migration and the reason underpinning such hopes.
3. Research on gay Malaysian men who have migrated to other Asian countries with more respect for gay rights, such as Thailand and Taiwan.

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