

PHYSICAL CHANGES AS PART OF MIDLIFE CRISIS: THE CASE OF URBAN MALAY WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Midlife crisis is a challenging process for both man and woman as it tangled up with all sorts of other encounters. To make matters worse, women in particular have to come to terms with their bodily changes due to menopause. Throughout menopause there are obvious physiological changes that are associated with ageing and this is universal, although this does not mean that women accept and are happy with the physiological markers of decline. The objective of this study is to examine how middle-aged women conceptualize their bodily changes due to menopause. This study employed qualitative methods. To obtain meaningful data, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 urban middle-aged women who were recruited via the purposive sampling technique. These women, aged 50-58 years old are predominantly Malay, educated and work in various organizations. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings of this study reveal that the majority of the urban middle-aged Malay women have internalised the 'culture of youth and beauty' and think that the signs of ageing on their bodies are undesirable. Women who expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies and 'looks' have no doubt been influenced by the media in Malaysia which has started to portray Western ideals of beauty and youth. These women increasingly feel the pressure to conform to the idealistic standards portrayed through the media. Therefore, they have spent a lot of money to look and feel good, although they acknowledged their bodies are ageing. Clearly losing youthful looks and vitality and losing the ability to reproduce, both of which are connected, have the potential to create discomfort, and can be seen as an assault to self-identity.

Keywords: *beauty culture, body image, menopause, middle-age, midlife crisis*

PERUBAHAN FIZIKAL SEBAHAGIAN DARIPADA KRISIS UMUR PERTENGAHAN: KES WANITA MELAYU BANDAR

ABSTRAK

Krisis umur pertengahan adalah satu proses yang mencabar bagi kaum lelaki dan wanita kerana ia berkait rapat dengan pelbagai perkara lain. Keadaan menjadi semakin mencabar apabila wanita harus menghadapi perubahan fizikal yang disebabkan oleh menopause. Sepanjang tempoh menopause, ada beberapa perubahan fisiologi ketara yang dikaitkan dengan penuaan yang bersifat umum. Ini tidak bermakna kebanyakan wanita dapat menerima dan merasa gembira dengan tanda-tanda penuaan tersebut. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengenalpasti bagaimana wanita umur pertengahan menangani perubahan fizikal mereka disebabkan oleh menopause. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kualitatif. Untuk mendapatkan data, temubual secara mendalam telah dijalankan bersama 30 wanita Melayu yang berumur di antara 50-58 tahun, berpendidikan tinggi dan bekerja di pelbagai organisasi. Kesemua temubual telah ditranskripsi dan dianalisa menggunakan kaedah tematik. Dapatan kajian telah menunjukkan bahawa kebanyakan wanita Melayu umur pertengahan di bandar telah menghayati budaya keremajaan dan kecantikan serta berpendapat bahawa tanda-tanda penuaan adalah sesuatu yang tidak diinginkan. Tidak syak lagi, wanita-wanita yang telah meluahkan rasa tidak puas hati dengan perubahan fizikal dan penampilan mereka telah dipengaruhi oleh media di Malaysia yang menggambarkan kecantikan dan keremajaan mengikut acuan Barat. Tekanan yang tinggi untuk memenuhi piawai kecantikan Barat melalui media dapat dirasai oleh kebanyakan wanita ini. Justeru, mereka telah menghabiskan sejumlah wang yang banyak untuk tampil dan merasa selesa walaupun mereka mengakui bahawa fizikal mereka sedang mengalami fasa penuaan. Jelas sekali, penampilan keremajaan dan keupayaan reproduktif yang berkurangan adalah berkait rapat kerana berpotensi dalam mewujudkan situasi tidak selesa dan boleh dilihat sebagai ancaman terhadap identiti diri.

Kata kunci: budaya kecantikan, imej tubuh, menopause, krisis umur pertengahan, wanita

INTRODUCTION

Midlife crisis, a stage that most adults go through is a major life changing experience that can cause a psychological stress, depression and anxiety following the loss of their loved ones, career setback, divorce and many others. It should be understood socially and culturally. This phenomena has impacted the live of both man and woman between 35-50 years old. It is a controversial syndrome to the health personnel as the problem is link to the brain functioning and hormonal changes. Symptoms of midlife crisis includes lost focus, depression, mood swing, fatigue and memory loss (Banister 1999). Based on many studies, men is badly affected with this situation. They noticed this phenomena when their grandchild celebrated the first birthday. Some are not comfortable when they feel their sexual performance has reduced due to the depletion of testosterone hormones. At one point, most men questioned their achievements at this age either about their career or personal lives. When, the feeling of uncertainty appears, it leads to depression and a state of unstable emotional condition coupled with the physical and emotional symptoms. Indeed, this situation has altered their relationships with family members. Like men, women too feel uncomfortable with midlife following menopause (Kwak et al. 2014, Kuh et al. 2002, Li Ping Wong et al. 2012). Changes have started to appear when they reach their menopausal stage. Menopausal symptoms like hot flushes, mood swing, loss of sexual interest, wrinkle skin and fatigue have a profound effect on their daily activities.

Women's role today is multi-functional – as wives, mothers, sisters, grandmothers and career women who contribute to nation building. No doubt, Malaysian women and other women elsewhere around the world today have shown potential abilities in leadership, business and management. Therefore, their contribution is needed by the society. Consequently, in having to maintain traditional roles while having to develop and improve their careers, women have had to face a great number of 'obligations'. In addition, women too, have to give serious attention to their

own health and well-being in order to keep themselves active both at home and in the work place. All of this has complicated their lives particularly in understanding the conditions under which most working women face the challenges of growing older.

At the empirical level, the overriding interest is to document and analyse the experience of urban middle-age Malay women in relation to menopause. This topic is worth studying because it affects women's emotional as well as their overall well-being in the later part of their lives. The issue of midlife crisis among menopausal women in Malaysia is understudied. The challenges they went through are not spoken or discussed. Therefore, this paper attempts to examine how middle-aged women conceptualize their bodily changes due to menopause.

The Notion of Femininity and Beauty from the Malay Perspective

Malay women have re-worked traditional ideas of femininity through which they have come to reconceptualise the realities of their lives. There are very few studies on Malay beauty and femininity. The works of Omar (1994), Swami and Tovée (2005) and McDowell and Bond (2006) who conducted research on the perception of beauty, physical attractiveness and body image among Malay women showed some similarities. Omar (1994) emphasized that the concept of femininity in the Malay culture includes both proper attire and deportment. Malay women are expected to dress and behave modestly according to religion and *adat*. Omar's respondents in her study defined femininity in terms of being well-groomed, *lemah-lembut* (graceful), *sopan* (modest) and *tidak bising* (not loud). Using this perspective the character of an ideal Malay woman is that she fulfils her religious duties, is modest in her behaviour and fertile.

Like the majority of Western women, to look attractive is also important to Malay women. To enhance their good looks and attractiveness, Ong (1990) found that Malay *adat* emphasised preserving sexual attractiveness to retain the husbands' interest. Previously, many Malay women drank *jamu* to boost their health and to appear young and vital. Drinking *jamu* is strongly recommended especially during the post-partum period to restore the women's health, physical beauty and sexual urges (Omar 1994; Laderman 1983; Karim 1992). Today, drinking *jamu* is very rare except during the post-partum period. Swami and Tovée (2005) conducted a study on perceived physical attractiveness among females in Britain and Malaysia. They recruited 682 participants from both countries and women were asked to rate a set of preferred images of women. The study discovered both British and Malaysian women preferred a low Body Mass Index (BMI) of about 20-21kg/m². Malaysian women who resided in the urban areas of Malaysia preferred images of women with lower BMIs compared to Malaysian women who live in rural areas. Swami and Tovée postulated that the preference of lower BMI by Malaysian women is influenced by the media who portray images of slim physique, an image which is also preferred by most Western women.

Similarly, McDowell and Bond (2006) who focused on the study of negative body image found that the impact of Western messages of thinness has influenced Malay women' and that these messages have been disseminated largely through the media. McDowell and Bond compared body images of three cultural groups, Malay, Samoan and Australian. Their findings showed that Malay women preferred the slim physique similar to the Australian women who participated in the study. Samoan women on the other hand, showed little preference towards slim physique because their culture prefers the endomorphic body type. Both researchers also studied the weight-related behaviours of diet and exercise as a means of maintaining their desired body shape. In terms of losing weight and maintaining a slim physique, Malay, Samoan and Australian women adopt either dieting or exercising as a strategy. However, the Malays and Samoans are very flexible in choosing their strategy. They can go for either exercising or dieting, but rarely combine both. The Malays prefer dieting to exercising, which is yet to become a behaviour that is associated with cutting down weight. Conversely, Australian women were found to combine both dieting and exercising for weight loss purposes. McDowell and Bond concluded that the culture of thinness which has been perpetuated by the West has made a great impact on other cultures too.

'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. This famous proverb indicates that beauty is a subjective matter. However, judging by Western standards this would not seem to be the case. As Wolf (1991) notes beauty, in the Western context is treated like a 'currency system' (p. 12). It can depreciate or otherwise depending on political or economic factors. If the commodity is highly demanded, then the need to maintain its market value is high. Similarly, if a woman is beautiful, they are regarded as sexually attractive and vice-versa. While *adat* requires women to maintain their sexual attractiveness for the purpose of satisfying their husbands, further emphasis is placed upon femininity and sexual attractiveness through messages in Western media. Life for women in the period just before, during and after menopause in Malay society is complex and challenging.

STUDY DESIGN

This study employs qualitative design. According to Rice and Ezzy (2005), the flexibility inherent in qualitative research helps the researcher to understand meanings, interpretations and subjective experiences of vulnerable groups. In addition, qualitative methods allow researchers to listen to 'voices of the silenced, othered, [and those] marginalised by the social order' (Rice 2007, p. 7). 30 women aged between 50 to 56 years and worked outside their own homes participated in this study. All of them were recruited via the snowball sampling technique which helped the researcher to link up with other women. In-depth interviews have been employed to obtain ethically grounded and rich data for this research. The interview is often unstructured. It is designed in such a way as to give many opportunities and to allow some degree of flexibility for participants to speak about their feelings and experiences using their own words rather than to follow a set of pre-determined questions that are usually employed in a survey research. To preserve the actual words of the participants, all interviews, were audio-taped with the participants' knowledge and consent. Following this, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Permission to quote from the interviews to be used in this study was granted by the women. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the privacy of the women who participated.

RESULTS

In general, most women have four things in common: they are concerned with their declining physical appearance and how their bodies are ageing; they have, to varying degrees, problems with their sex lives; they experience distressing menopausal symptoms; and they mostly attended the menopause clinic to get treatment from the doctor for their menopausal symptoms, particularly hot-flashes, lack of sexual desire, vaginal dryness and tiredness. The level of anxiety for women in the group with high anxiety is of course varied and while there are similarities there are also differences. Some women have a very high level of anxiety related to their menopausal experience and ageing in general, while others have moderate to mild anxiety. There are a wide range of responses regarding how menopause influences their sense of self-worth physically, emotionally and socially.

The mid-life crisis: physical appearance

One apprehension that many women have as they approach menopause is the changing shape and tone of their bodies. In other words, the women's perceptions of their own body image changes. It is common to evaluate one's own body image based on physical attractiveness and overall appearance (Koch et al. 2005; Kelson, Kearney-Cooke & Lansky 1990). Most of the women described the clear indications of their bodily changes, like wrinkled skin, excess abdominal fat, weight gain and sagging breasts. In general, they described their bodies as *tak sedap badan* (body don't feel comfortable), *badan rasa lain* (body feels different) and *badan dah tak macam dulu* (body is no longer like before). In reality, throughout menopause there are obvious physiological changes that are associated with ageing and this is universal, although this does not mean that women accept and are happy with the physiological markers of decline. One of the women's main concerns was the changes to their skin. Medical studies have indicated that the skin undergoes

many changes during menopause, including dehydration, thinning and loss of elastic tissue (Cosgrove 2007; Quatresooz 2006; Rousseau 1998). This condition is due to the depletion of oestrogen which results in the declining collagen content and decreased capacity for tissue repair (Wines & Willsted 2001).

Dalila, aged 50, who works in a government office said:

I feel old, look old. I feel my skin on both hands is different. You see... the skin has lost its elasticity [showing both hands]. My face, neck, eyes have wrinkles. I'm worried if I look old.

The same feeling has been expressed by Sharifah, aged 51:

When you reach 50, your skin is 'out' [not firm] no matter how much anti-ageing cream you put on your face. I don't believe in Botox injections. I took other products to make my skin look firmer and younger. I think HRT helps. In fact, operating a beauty salon demands me to look presentable most of the time in front of my customers.

Some women, around the time of menopause, express concern about their changing body shape and weight. This was the case for women in this study who were of varying weights. It was not just the overweight women who were worried, but women of 'normal' weight and those who were underweight had anxiety about their body shapes too. Interestingly, all the women described their weight and body shape as a problem or something that they particularly disliked about their appearance. Some women believed that there is a need to maintain their body shape to look and feel good in their midlife. One of the women interviewed told me that when she reached her menopausal stage, her hour-glass figure increased in size. As a result, she had to rely upon beauty work interventions including slimming tablets, slimming gel and weight loss programs. Despite the dissatisfaction with body shape none of the women interviewed used cosmetic surgery or liposuction fat reduction as they claimed it was too expensive. The cost appeared to be the major deterrent to using surgery to enhance the body. Nevertheless, the majority of women in this study were not happy about this change. It can therefore be argued that dissatisfaction with physical appearance in midlife is not confined to Western women alone.

Dion, Berscheid and Walster (1972) asserted that in the Western societies they demonstrated that what is beautiful is good. This perspective focuses heavily on the physical appearance, particularly the body shape. Davies and Furnham (1986) postulated that women whose bodies do not comply with current ideals are likely to express dissatisfaction with their body weight. It is interesting that in some cases doctors supported the women's quest for an ideal body by prescribing slimming tablets. Others turn to the fashion and cosmetics industry to help turn around the normal physiological process of ageing. All of the accounts indicate that women experienced some feeling of uneasiness regarding how they appear, especially with regards to their skin, body shape and weight. This has undoubtedly affected their emotions and cognitive reactions. Some of the women have low self-esteem and this is linked to their appearance which makes them feel inadequate. They try on new fashions or try to mix with and emulate younger colleagues in their offices.

This study supports Swami and Tovée (2005) who studied female attractiveness in both Britain and Malaysia. Their findings revealed that social and cultural contexts have influenced women's preferences for body sizes. In their study, Malaysian women in the urban areas associated attractiveness with slim physique whereas women in the rural areas preferred a rounder body size which symbolises fertility. Factors like media, education, employment opportunities, mate choice, birth control and legal rights have influenced the condition of Malaysian women (Raja Mamat 1991; Nagaraj 1995; Hamzah 2003; Karim & Abdullah 2003). Thus, these conditions have created a conflicting scenario in the lives of the women who strive simultaneously for career accomplishment while maintaining their physical attractiveness. This is true for the women in this study who are very much concerned about their body weight and shape. Since these women are still working within large organisations, physical appearance or attractiveness, particularly their body shape and weight, has imparted "an emblematic credence into the social and work-related sphere"

(Lee cited in Swami & Tovée 2005: 125). This has contributed to an understanding of the commonalities and differences accepted by people from different age groups, opposite genders or different statuses.

Grey hair: an interesting difference

Interestingly, regardless of whether the women put on their *tudung/hijab* (veil) or not, none of them felt concerned about their *uban* or *rambut putih* which in Malay language means grey hair. In fact, none of them said they dyed their hair. Unlike many women in other Western countries, they did not associate grey hair with negativity and it seemed a more acceptable symbol of ageing than ageing skin and sagging bodies. Instead, the women indicated that grey hair is a sign that they are 'no longer young'. While their responses towards their skin and bodies (weight and shape) reflect a compliance with the dominant Western culture of youth and beauty, they greying hair did not fit the typology of youthful beauty. According to the women, grey hair symbolises respect and wisdom. While they were unimpressed by their changing body shape and the appearance of their skin, hair colour did not appear to worry them.

Glazier (1983) made the following observation among Trinidadian men: canes, glasses, hearing aids and grey hair serve as symbols of respectability, though these kinds of symbols are often more respectable for males than for females. Previous studies, particularly among Western women, have shown that greying hair is not an acceptable sign of ageing. Grey hair is associated with looking old (Koppelman 1996) or a manifestation of mortality (Synnott 1987). In today's youth and beauty fixated society where grey hair is seen not as a sign of wisdom but an indication that one is approaching old age, women are often motivated to hide their grey hair with the use of dye to camouflage this particular sign of ageing. Therefore, today the hair care industry is actively introducing hair products in the form of dye, spray, gel, shampoo, conditioner and so forth to meet the consumer demand. Even though grey hair, or the need to dye their hair, is not a focus of concern for these women, they do put on make-up to look attractive and presentable in the workplace. Diana, a 53-year-old nurse, explained that she must put on her make-up because she needed to look 'fresh', by which she meant she wished to appear youthful, energetic and vibrant which was of particular importance to her in the workplace as well as the home. In her own words, Diana told me:

I always put on make-up to work. I make sure I put on lipstick and my favourite blue-black eye shadow. Even if I'm at home, I must put on at least my eye shadow. My make-up is a necessary thing for me. It's like *makanan jiwa* (food for the soul). If I don't put on my make-up, I feel uncomfortable or incomplete. My make-up and I can't be separated.

Although many people say that beauty is within, it seems that what people view on the outside is important to many of the women in this study. It is what they have to deal with on a daily basis. However, though women, even older women in Malay society, may feel pressured to look a certain way, this does not apply in regards to hair colour. This interesting paradox serves as a metaphor for the way that menopause and ageing are viewed in Malay society. There is a degree of Westernisation, but many of the older values in regards to the respect associated with ageing still hold true.

DISCUSSION

Media representations of the menopause affect middle-aged women cannot be separated from representation of middle-aged and older women in general. Much of the anxiety surrounding menopause is not just about the biological symptoms associated with the cessation of menstruation, they are also connected very closely to what this means to a woman's identity. The symptoms of menopause also mean that the biological markers of ageing become more obvious and menopause is itself symbolic of a transition to another stage of life, where the notion of beauty is less clearly

associated with ideas about feminine and youthful looks. Studies about Malay beauty are very limited. Malay beauty focuses on the principles of beautifying from the inside and the outside of a woman's body (Ahmad 2005). According to Omar (1994), to enhance a woman's health and attractiveness, the Malay women in her study consumed *jamu*. *Jamu* is usually taken after childbirth to maintain physical beauty, health and sexual urges (Omar 1994; Laderman 1983; Karim 1992). Apart from that, wearing gold jewellery is another way to look attractive and beautiful. Jewellery plays an important role in the Malay culture, not only for beautification purposes but gender differentiation as well (Omar 1994). On the other hand, it is also a possibility of some attempt to indicate degrees of financial success and status. Studies have shown that the association of youth with beauty is in part a product of Western media, which portrays feminine beauty in a particularly idealistic manner. As a result, many non-Western societies have imitated the Western ideal of youth and beauty (Frith, Shaw & Cheng 2005; Swami & Tovée 2005). The women in this study who expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies and 'looks' have no doubt been influenced by the media in Malaysia which has started to portray Western ideals of beauty and youth. Cusumano and Thompson (1997) indicated that media portrayals of women create negative influences over the way they feel about their bodies. Most of the women said they were influenced by women's magazines and beauty product catalogues, as well as friends who visited spas and beauty parlours. In addition, this study suggests that the majority of the urban middle class Malay women have internalised the 'culture of youth and beauty' and think that the signs of ageing on their bodies are undesirable. This is also evident from other women who, after looking at several women magazines, expressed their feelings about needing to appear 'young' and beautiful in their middle-age.

According to Martin (1992), the emphasis upon the beautiful body reflects the social and cultural context in which women are socialised to view their bodies as parts or fragments of the self. Bordo (1993:35) stated that "the body we experience and conceptualise is always mediated by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature". Although the researcher agree with Bordo in principle, the attitudes to, or meanings associated with, the body may be meaningful in different ways for different groups. Some groups and individuals may view the body more as functional to the ability to perform, while others may pay more attention to the body as symbolic of some value such as beauty. Each and every woman had a body which was visibly starting to show the biological processes of ageing, but to some this was distressing, while to others it was of no particular concern.

The emphasis on youth and beauty is overwhelmingly noticeable in advertisements, movies, television and print media. Women, regardless of age, are frequently exposed to visual images of young women and advertisements promising youthful looks through beauty interventions like anti-ageing and anti-wrinkle creams, Botox injections, weight loss products, breast implants, skin lightening or tanning, liposuction and cosmetic surgery. Immersing themselves into this culture of youth and beauty has resulted in devastating problems for women as they age, ranging from low self-esteem to depression, anxiety, anorexia nervosa and bulimia (Becker & Hamburg 1996; Wolf 1991). The researcher agree with Patton (2006) who argues that the pervasive influence of hegemonically defined standards of beauty in Western societies and the marginalisation of certain types of beauty that deviate from the 'norm' are devastating to all women. In addition, the media is also responsible for reflecting images of slimness and link this image to other symbols of prestige, happiness, love and success for women (Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991). Because the images in the media have been repeatedly viewed over a lifetime, the Western beauty standard becomes internalised and thus leads many women to feel fulfilled and satisfied only when they are working toward, or succeeding in, the achievement of that beauty standard. What is particularly notable from my study is that this pervasive influence does not happen in Western countries alone and it is becoming increasingly obvious amongst urban middle class Malay women in Malaysia. It is notable that this is not limited to young women, but middle-aged and older women increasingly feel the pressure to conform to the idealistic standards portrayed through the media.

Regardless of age, women look forward to meeting the Western beauty standard which is supposedly acceptable to the majority of people and therefore is the ideal norm. Adherence to Western standards of beauty can be exported to other countries [including Malaysia] with, in this

case, very concerning consequences. In my study for example, women who no longer conform to the ideal beauty image of youthful appearance report that they are subjected to their husbands' criticism and jokes. Women in this study have spent a lot of money to look and feel good, although they acknowledged their bodies are ageing. Clearly losing youthful looks and vitality and losing the ability to reproduce, both of which are connected, have the potential to create discomfort, and can be seen as an assault to self-identity which confirmed Douglas's (2002) idea that these kinds of responses to a physical transition indeed trigger potential harm and danger. The findings have highlighted the significance of culture and lifestyle that shapes the understanding of ageing among menopausal urban Malay women. No doubt as women grow old, there are many similar changes they encounter related to physical health, transition of roles, sexual activity, meaning and purpose of life and emotional well-being. In Malay society, strong family ties and spiritual factors appear to be more prominent than immersing oneself in the youth, beauty and femininity culture. Nevertheless, many urban Malay women today have succumbed to the notion of the Western youth and femininity culture transmitted predominantly through the media. Other women have also reported that age-related changes were distressing because women were 'pressured' by the demands of society that promote attractiveness. Thus, women felt unhappy about their outward appearance which they perceived had become less attractive as they aged.

It appears that in contemporary society much of a woman's self-worth is tied to her physical appearance, and ageing represents declining social value (Grimes 2003). Women are fearful and worried about ageing and many buy beauty products which promise them ways to maintain a youthful look throughout their middle-age. As a by-product of this culture of youth and beauty, reaching the menopausal stage means that women are likely to be perceived as unattractive, asexual and undesirable. Ballinger (1990) argues that this is true in the Western culture, where the media tends to put a high value upon youth, and the menopause is a clear reminder of increasing age. The researcher would argue that this is increasingly the case also in urban Malaysia. It appears that the media contributes to a discourse of menopause which construes menopause and the role of middle-aged and older women by valuing what they are not.

CONCLUSION

Menopause, no doubt, is an important passage in a woman's life as it brings a lot of changes in her body that can affect her social life, feelings, relationships with her husband and other people as well as her work performance. Women across cultures and within cultures have their own unique journey through menopause. Generally, urban Malay women acknowledged that menopause as part of the biological process. However, due to pressures from home and outside of home, particularly in the paid workforce, most women found the physical changes due to menopause is a distressing one.

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