

Kathoey: I'm Not a Boy, Not Yet a Woman?

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WRITER'S COMMENT: As a neurology, physiology, and behavior (NPB) major, I seldom get an opportunity like this UWP18 assignment to explore topics beyond the sciences. After talking to my housemate about how Thai transgender beauty pageants were the highlight of her trip to Thailand, I wondered, are Thais really as accepting towards transgenders as their media portrays? Or, are pageants only glamorizing and covering-up for the discriminations that some Thai transgenders experience? Even though my paper focused on Thai transgenders, some of these anecdotes are definitely analogous to those of transgenders anywhere. But, it was after working on this project that I began to appreciate the Davis Student Community Center for advocating transgenders bathrooms and to appreciate Bath & Body for hiring a transgender cashier. I must thank Dr. Scherr for guiding me through this incredible adventure, in which I learned to care for a community that was once unfamiliar to me. So, please accept my invitations and join me on this educational (yes, I know) journey!

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In this essay Fiona Ng responds to an assignment in which I ask students to write a definitional argument about a controversial word, concept, or cultural practice that arouses their curiosity. Fiona's ideas for essays, whether reflective or research oriented, were always captivating. This one was no different. In her essay "Kathoey: I'm Not a Boy, Not Yet a Woman?" Fiona reveals the subtle and intriguing lives of, and attitudes towards, the kathoey, or third gender, in Thailand. When Fiona approached me with the idea of writing about the kathoey, who challenge classification or definition altogether, I was immediately fascinated. Her observation that young Thai women often fear that kathoeyes might outperform women in fulfilling their own sexual roles as females especially intrigued me. Her essay promised to provide both a captivating perspective of Thai culture and to show how the kathoey unmask gender roles altogether. Indeed, the essay astutely fulfills these promises, and more; Fiona unravels the legal and

personal complexities of the lives of kathoeyes (and all “third genders”) and argues forcefully that until laws recognize the transgender sex category, and until kathoeyes, and other transgender individuals, tell their stories, we will be the poorer for it. Fiona Ng’s recognition in Prized Writing is well deserved.

—Raquel Scherr, University Writing Program

Ping, born and raised in Thailand, identifies *khao* as a *kathoey*¹. As a child, Ping wore high-heels and flamboyant makeup when competing against *khao* four older sisters in make-believe beauty pageants. Despite the strong sibling relationship, Ping’s family was far from harmonious. In the narrative collection entitled, *Male Bodies Women’s Souls*, Ping writes:

Every time my father came home, he would argue with my mother. This made me sick of my father’s behavior. I thought that my father was the kind of man who is no good, and vowed not to take him as a role model. This is probably one reason that caused me to behave in the way I did (that is, not like other boys), because I admire my mother very much. (“Ping” 73)

Furthermore, Ping’s kindergarten classmates teased *khao* for being a *kathoey* who did not act “like other boys” (“Ping” 73). Even as an adult, Ping experiences discrimination; for example, a restaurant manager once rejected *khao* job application after showing discomfort regarding Ping’s gender-ambiguous appearance (“Ping” 75). Ping says, “My sexual deviance was a thing about which I...felt very guilty [for]” because that has disappointed *khao* parents, and to compensate, Ping thrived in academics and eventually attended the academically acclaimed Chiang Mai University (“Ping” 74).

Along with Ping, many university students, corporate workers, street vendors, national athletes, singers, movie stars, beauty queens, show girls, bartenders, and prostitutes make up the 10,000 to 100,000 *kathoey* in Thailand (Armbrecht; Matzner 72). Peter A. Jackson, a prominent researcher on Thailand transgenderism, defines *kathoey* as

¹Unlike in English, the third person pronoun in Thai is gender neutral; *khao* means “he, she, him, or her” (Shulich 433). To avoid assigning a gendered pronoun to *kathoey*, I will use *khao* as the third person pronoun when referencing to *kathoey*.

“hermaphrodite persons as well as effeminate, cross-dressing, or transsexual males” (“Tolerant But Unaccepting” 229). To elaborate, Andrew Matzner, researcher on Southeast Asian/Pacific Transgenderism, adds that *kathoey* also refers to effeminate males who have had or not had sex-reassignment surgeries and cross-dressing males who take female hormones (74). Because of the growing *kathoey* population, scholars and Thais recognize *kathoey* as “*phet thee sam*” or the “third gender” (Boney).

Despite informally labeling *kathoey* as the third gender, Thais’ acceptance of *kathoey* remains inhomogeneous. About a decade ago, Peter A. Jackson coined the phrase “Tolerant yet Unaccepting” to generalize how Thais acknowledge, yet criticize, the prevalent *kathoey* subculture (“Tolerant But Unaccepting” 239). This attitude traces back to Buddhist beliefs that predominate in Thailand. Buddhist teachings encourage Thais to tolerate individual differences, including sexual deviance (Armbretch). However, Buddhism also highlights karma and reincarnation, which lead Thais to believe that *kathoey* are repaying a debt for having been players and heartbreakers in their previous lives; hence, in this life, “*kathoey* are woman trapped in a man’s body, forever doomed to unrequited love” (Armbretch). Since the *kathoey* are technically paying off sins accumulated from their previous lives, Thais feel *less* obligated to permit *kathoey* equal human rights (Armbretch). Some Thais even purposefully discriminate against or harass *kathoey* to preserve the rights of gender normative individuals. For example, many employers, like the restaurant manager in Ping’s story, have been discarding *kathoey*’s applications to reserve job vacancies for a “normal person” (Armbretch). Fortunately, not every *kathoey* experiences the same degree of negativity and hostility.

When compared with ordinary *kathoey* individuals, some public *kathoey* figures receive tremendous praise and support from the Thais. For example, in the blockbuster documentary *Satree Lek (The Iron Ladies)*, filmmakers portrayed the national champion *kathoey* volleyball team as individuals who shared the Thai values of group-centrism and endurance of hardship (Unaldi 65–66). More recently, Bell Nunita, finalist of the 2011 *Thailand’s Got Talent* competition, was popular for *khao* talent of using both tenor and soprano voices when singing love duets. Furthermore, while Ping’s appearance led to employer discrimination, in venues such as beauty contests, *kathoey*’s appearance can garner them respect, recognition, and rewards. Some winners of local *kathoey* beauty pageants even represent Thailand in international beauty pageants (Wong 6). In some cases, Thais not only praise *kathoey* for

their talent and beauty; *kathoey*'s courage to present themselves as public figures also earns them the Thais' admiration (Boney).

However, not every instance of media portrayal glamorizes *kathoey*. Even though the media plays the important role of broadcasting these beauty pageants and glorifying *kathoey*'s talents (e.g., sports, singing, and acting), mainstream television often portray *kathoey* as loud-mouthed jokers, who Thais call “*sanuk*.” According to Peter A. Jackson, the Thai media likes to use *sanuk* characters in dramas and shows because the audiences laugh at the *sanuk* as a means to express their suppressed distress and hatred for *kathoey* (Unaldi 70). Although the entertainment industry does offer a stage for these actors to show their talent in humor, it also perpetuates negative *kathoey* stereotypes.

While workforce discrimination and media glamorization bring out the discrepancies between two extreme attitudes, interviews with Thai young-adults revealed that acceptance of *kathoey* is more circumstantial. According to a survey that researcher Andrew Matzner conducted at the Chiang Mai University, the degree to which students accepted *kathoey* depended on the relationship (i.e., family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers) that the student shared with the *kathoey* (76-77). But more importantly, how a *kathoey* socially interacts greatly influences others' impressions of *khao*. Many students reported they enjoyed befriending socially engaging *kathoey*; some enjoyed listening to *kathoey* give relationship advice and make sexual jokes that applied to both genders (Matzner 83-84). Yet, some students at Chiang Mai University disliked *kathoey* who openly flirted with male classmates; female students perceived this flirting as competition, whereas male students felt uneasy because the flirtation challenged their masculinity and heterosexual identity (Matzner 84). Even though *kathoey* experience antagonistic treatments, these students' responses suggest that Thais do categorize *kathoey* as a *third gender*. However, does the current *third gender* label actually translate into Thais treating *kathoey* with the same respect that normative genders receive? Is the present denotation of the *third gender* masking Thais' demands for *kathoey* to assimilate with normative gender standards?

In fact, the present definition of the *third gender* strips away *kathoey* identity, and denotes *kathoey* as lesser beings compared to females and males. Even normative gender structure relies on establishing differences between masculine and feminine standards to maintain the male-female dichotomy. According to Judith Lorber, Professor of Sociology and Women Studies at

Brooklyn College, society ranks genders based on a *stratification system*, which defines female as simply “[not] male” (66). However, this definition implies that deviants—females—are inferior because they lack masculine characteristics and qualities (Lorber 66). Thailand’s gender trichotomy—male, female, and *kathoey*—exhibits a gender hierarchy analogous to that mentioned in “*The Social Construction of Gender*” by Professor Lorber; just as females are “not males” under the normative stratification system, Thais define *kathoey* as “not man or woman.” Megan J. Sinnott, professor of Lesbian and Gay Studies at Yale University, quoted a middle age *kathoey*: “If somebody calls me third sex/gender, I won’t agree with that... ‘Third sex/gender’ means you are neither man nor woman, maybe some kind of monster. So there isn’t any third sex/gender for me” (6). The *kathoey* thinks *khao* resembles a monster only because *khao* lacks pivotal masculine and feminine qualities, regardless of what other qualities *khao* may have; this implies that Thais place *kathoey* at the bottom of their gender hierarchy, inferior to both males and females.

Specifically, the *kathoey gender* acts as a measurement of what Jackson called “unmasculinity.” Despite having a masculine physique, effeminate males do not display traditional masculine behaviors (e.g., aggression and domination). Furthermore, to sustain the dominant masculine perceptions of “male,” Thais exclude unmasculine/effeminate males from being “men” (Boney). This idea is embedded within the common belief that effeminate males must self-define as *kathoey*. For example, many Chiang Mai University students claimed that society would only accept the effeminate male as a person if he becomes a true *kathoey* (Matzner 88); even then, *kathoey* are placed below the males in the gender hierarchy.

In more severe cases, some Thais target *kathoey* “unmasculinity” through violence. According to Linda Malam, a professor at the University of Otago, if a *kathoey* dances outside the designated *kathoey* zones in a straight bar, heterosexual male bartenders “would pull their hair, or grab their breast/or crotch” (586). She observed that physically harassing the *kathoey* boosted the bartenders’ sense of masculinity (Malam 587); bartenders established masculine dominance by victimizing *kathoey*—the “unmasculine” beings. However, if the *kathoey* goes to the bar with a tourist, bartenders tend not to harass *khao*; instead, they find it amusing and ego-boosting to watch foreigners fail at distinguishing a “real woman” from a *kathoey* (Malam 587). In this phenomenon, even though bartenders acknowledge *kathoey*’s rights to party within their restricted zones, the bartenders’ need to re-affirm masculinity trumps their respect for *kathoey*’s rights. Additionally, these

designated “zones” physically represent the gender stratification system at work: a zone for “man and woman” versus a marginalized *kathoey* zone for “not man and not woman.”

Even though the stratification system defines *kathoey* as “not females,” Thais attempt to mask *kathoey* identity by expecting *kathoey* to adhere to female gender norms. In particular, Thais evaluate *kathoey*'s beauty by traditional femininity standards (e.g., fair skin, sharp facial features), driving *kathoey* into mimicking their female counterparts. For some *kathoey*, the hope of winning the beauty pageant title motivates them to morph themselves into someone who is indistinguishable from, and sometimes even more feminine than, a real woman. Aside from adopting soft-spoken speech patterns and small delicate gestures, and wearing makeup and woman's clothing, many *kathoey* contestants go through extreme medical procedures (e.g., sex-reassignment surgery, breast implantation, Adam's apple reduction, and hormone injections) to make themselves appear more feminine (Boney).

Unfortunately, even at beauty pageants—a major opportunity by which *kathoey* receive recognition and praise—*kathoey* are only acceptable to Thais if they successfully suppress signs of masculinity and adequately perform femininity. Wong Ying Wuen, from the National University of Singapore's Southeast Asian Studies department, stated that beauty pageants allow *kathoey* to build an “identity...based on transformations and the successful performances of femininity, in the face of biological masculinity...not... upon their ability to perform transsexuality” (5-10). For instance, some *kathoey* try to minimize the appearance of their anatomic masculine characteristics, such as the Adam's apple, to perform as a woman. As Wong argued, instead of performing the third gender/trans-sexuality, *kathoey* are occupied with suppressing their innate masculine traits and enhancing artificial feminine traits. Instead of having normatively gendered individuals (e.g., heterosexual bartenders) reinforce the traditional gender dichotomy, *kathoey* passively reaffirm the gender dichotomy by adhering to traditional feminine beauty standards.

In addition to adopting feminine appearance and manner, Thais also expect *kathoey* to perform the subordinate female sex role. Jackson compared the social attitudes regarding *kathoey* and *gays*, claiming that while both are associated with homoeroticism, Thais are less “disturbed” by *kathoey*-and-straight-man eroticism. However, this is true only if the male partner plays the dominant sex role while the *kathoey* plays the submissive

female (“Tolerant Yet Unaccepting” 238). Likewise, in the interviews that Matzner conducted, Chiang Mai University students also evaluated *kathoey* based on the modesty of their sexual behaviors. Female students found it only acceptable when *kathoey* act as gossiping and partying buddies, but they disliked *kathoey* who openly competed for male students’ affection (Matzner 84). Female students seem to fear that *kathoey* can outperform them in fulfilling expected feminine sex roles, which makes female students feel insecure about their sex appeal. Male students also avoid *kathoey* who openly flirt, because they think flirtation challenges their heterosexuality (Matzner 84).

While *kathoey* value Thais’ tolerance for their sexual orientation, the criteria that Thais use to legitimize such eroticism force *kathoey* into performing female norms over performing a trans-sexual role. These criteria undermine the expression of *kathoey* identity. Specially, Thais expect *kathoey* to subject to male-dominance by having them act as submissive sex objects for men. While some individuals would only accept *kathoey* who flawlessly perform female sex roles, others would only accept those who do not challenge their gender role performance. Regardless, both concepts are grounded in how well the *kathoey* conforms to normative gender expectations but not how well the *kathoey* expresses *khao* sexual desires. Therefore, *kathoey*, who Thais unofficially label as the *third gender*, are those who are neither “true males” nor “true females” but perform as females.

Paradoxically, even though Thais presently recognize *kathoey* as the *third gender* (or *phet thee sam*), Thais have not translated this recognition into providing equal rights to *kathoey*. In a 2008 poll hosted by the Ramkhamhaeng University Public Opinion Center, 70% of the participants actually refused to grant *kathoey* the right to declare “*kathoey*” as their gender in legal documents (Armbrecht). As of 2012, the Thai government still hasn’t legalized *kathoey* as an official gender on identification cards, birth certificates, and passports (Martin). Despite national acknowledgement of certain *kathoey* at beauty contests, the lack of legal recognition debunks the *third gender* myth that Thais and scholars created. While it is inevitable that *kathoey* are neither women nor men, this does not permit Thais to identify *kathoey* solely by whom they *aren’t* instead of by who they *are*; specifically, *kathoey* should not have to manipulate their masculinity and fabricate their femininity to gain acceptance. Therefore, as a first step to re-recognizing the *kathoey* gender, Thais should legalize *kathoey* gender status on official documentations.

Thais should follow the examples of Netherland, Belgium, Nepal, and more recently, Australia to add a “transgender status” in legal identification documents. Australian lawmakers believe this will be a first step to providing equal rights to the third gender (The Guardian). Presently, *kathoeys* must report their birth gender in legal documents. There were many incidences of *kathoeys* detainment at the borders, because their documented gender did not match their apparent gender (Armbrecht). In fact, according to Jackson, many *kathoeys* have voiced that the government should legalize their gender status (“Bangkok” 36). However, some may argue, even if the government legalizes *kathoeys* gender, Thais would not necessarily treat *kathoeys* as an equal and independent gender; only pragmatic approaches and their elicited structural changes would lead Thais to accept *kathoeys* as a separate gender. For example, in 1920, the act of legalizing women suffrage (through the nineteenth amendment) alone did not trigger American social acceptance of women’s equality. Instead, some may claim that its pragmatic aftermath—having women vote next to men at voting booths—accelerated the diminishing gap between women’s rights and men’s rights.

Even though pragmatic approaches might be more efficient at directly inducing structural changes, in some cases, legal recognition initiates pragmatic solutions and structural changes. If women’s suffrage were not implemented, women would not be voting; more importantly, the United States’ society would not have progressed to the point where women are not only allowed to vote, but are also allowed to be voted for (e.g., Sarah Palin, Hillary Clinton, and Nancy Pelosi). Similarly, even though legal recognition of the *kathoeys* status might not induce 100% of social acceptance, the Thai government should not deprive *kathoeys* of their right to identify as a gender that is independent of women and men.

Legal documentation of *kathoeys* gender will signify the falling of the first domino in a chain of social and legal movements to promote *kathoeys* rights. In 2002, Thailand’s Department of Mental health officially recognized that homosexuality is not an official mental disorder; following that, in 2008, the Thai military officially categorized *kathoeys*/third gender separately from gays when setting draft dismissal criteria (Armbrecht)². This chain of events shows that once Thai authorities officially re-categorize

² I solely used this example to demonstrate the potentials of a government-initiated domino effect. I do not agree with the government using this instance of recognition to discriminate against gays and *kathoeys*.

a certain subgroup of people, other prominent figures will follow. To support *kathoeys* as an independent gender, the Thai government must knock down the first domino (i.e. legalizing *kathoeys* gender status) so that other legal and social dominos will follow.

In fact, from the *kathoeys*'s points of view, legal documentation is practical because their ability to legally identify as a *kathoeys* will prevent them from having to choose between being male or female. As a transgender, Christie Elan-Cane, a presenter at the Gendy Conference hosted by the University of Manchester, supports acts that recognize transgender as a separate sex status. She complimented Google for offering their users the option to select "other" as their gender when they sign up for a Google account (Elan-Cane). The "*kathoeys* gender" option on identification cards would serve the same purpose. "Options" like these serve as the first avenue by which *kathoeys* reject social expectations of them having to identify as male or female and having to act according to feminine and masculine standards. Perhaps no other rights would be as important and empowering to the *kathoeys* than rejecting the gender trichotomy paradox under a stratification system.

At the same time, social movements, both microscopic and macroscopic, should support legal recognitions of *kathoeys*'s rights. As simple as the idea of adding *kathoeys* restrooms may sound, it raises key questions regarding the current gender structure in Thailand. Imagine a *kathoeys* standing in front of *khao* school's restrooms, does *khao* walk into the women's restroom or does *khao* walk into the men's restroom? If *khao* chooses the women's restroom, what prompted *khao* to make that decision? What if *khao* chooses to use the men's restroom? As of 2006, some elementary schools have already started allocating *kathoeys* restrooms on campus (Boney). Implementing *kathoeys* restrooms may be a crucial social domino piece, but it is far from being the last piece.

In addition to the government denoting *kathoeys* gender status on legal documents, privatized and publicized educators should encourage *kathoeys* to share and students to appreciate *kathoeys*'s struggles and stories through personal narratives. A university based survey indicated that 51% of the student body believed transgenderism is a form of mental disorder (Armbrecht). The percentage reflects a weak education about and appreciation for *kathoeys* in Thailand. The survey also indicates that even the most educated Thais are ignorant of *kathoeys*'s feelings and thoughts. It is important that *kathoeys* voice their opinions through written and oral

personal narratives instead of having researchers write what they believe are *kathoeys*' beliefs and feelings. The goal of these narratives is to normalize *kathoeys*. These personal stories would inform readers of the perpetual social pressures that cause *kathoeys* to conform, confront, or contest for acceptance. More importantly, these narratives would normalize *kathoeys* individuals by bringing out characteristics that *kathoeys* share as a group, characteristics that are unique to each individual, and characteristics that *kathoeys* share with normatively gendered individuals. Personal narratives also have the advantage of letting the *kathoeys* educate their society and demand change from their society.

Historical examples show that narratives are powerful tools for raising awareness of the oppressed. For example, abolitionist and ex-slave Frederick Douglass's autobiography modeled the success of personal narratives in educating and changing society's understandings of a controversial subject. Because many slave-owners prohibited their slaves from writing and communicating with people outside of their house and work fields, many Americans remained ignorant of the harsh conditions slaves experienced. Douglass's autobiography voiced the struggles in his journey from slavery to abolition. Similarly, *kathoeys* can use their narratives to expose the unjust social prejudice and treatments, and to propose necessary resolutions. Some researchers have started on such narrative projects; for example, in their book entitled (ironically) *Male Bodies Women's Souls*, researchers LeeRay Costa and Andrew Matzner compiled a collection of personal narratives written by young *kathoeys*. These personal narrative projects would empower the *kathoeys* if their stories encourage an audience to appreciate the *kathoeys*' inner-selves.

The best sectors for presenting oral narratives are the beauty pageants and television broadcasting, primarily because Thais already have a relatively positive outlook on *kathoeys* in beauty pageants and television shows. Secondly, Thais host beauty pageants at national and local scales, in urban and rural settings (Boney). Whether a Thai is literate or illiterate, rich or poor, he or she is bound to watch at least one beauty pageant in his or her lifetime; for many, just one *kathoeys*' narrative is enough to trigger lifelong perspective change.

Currently, Thais and acclaimed researchers do recognize that Thailand has three genders: male, female, and *kathoeys*. Even then, Thais do not treat *kathoeys* as a gender that is free of normative masculine and feminine expectations; not even legal documents can validate their gender. While gender partially defines one's character, one's life stories can affect

one's sexuality. Through Ping's narrative, one can learn that *khao* lacked a fatherly role model as a child. All Ping has wanted is that Thais would "stop looking down on and despising the third sex"; *khao* urges Thais to "give a chance to the third sex" because *kathoey* "have the same status and freedom of being human just as others do" ("Ping" 76).

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