

## **COMMENT | Confessions of a non-Malay**

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COMMENT | Back in 1991, I was a Form 5 student at Sekolah Menengah St Anne's Convent, Kulim, Kedah. My schoolmates and I had just sat for our trial SPM exams and eagerly awaited our results. Back then, some scholarship applications were made using the results of trial exams.

Upon receiving our results, students who were interested in applying for the scholarships were instructed to collect the application forms from our vice principal, Cikgu Rohana (not her real name). So a big group of us made our way to the school office, super excited.

"Cikgu, kami nak pohon biasiswa. Boleh kami dapatkan borang (We plan to apply for scholarships, can we have the forms)?" asked one of my friends.

Cikgu Rohana smiled and began giving out the form, one by one. I stood in line watching my friends receiving them. However, when it came to my turn, Cikgu

Rohana held on to the forms and gave me a stare instead.

“Saya pun nak borang biasiswa, cikgu (I too would like to have a scholarship form, teacher),” I said with a smile.

“Borang ni untuk pelajar yang cemerlang saja, bukan untuk semua orang (This form is only for good students, it is not for everyone),” she explained.

I was offended but I decided to give her a reasonable doubt - being a new addition to the school, perhaps she wasn't aware that I was also a good student, I thought.

“Saya pelajar cemerlang, cikgu (I am also a good student, teacher),” I explained in an awkward manner.

“Apa kamu dapat untuk trial (What was your result for trial)?” Cikgu Rohana asked me in such a way that made me feel small.

“Agregat 7 (7 aggregate).”

Cikgu Rohana found it difficult to believe that I did well in my trials. She demanded that I show her proof before releasing the scholarship form. And so I

did.

As we walked back to our classroom on that day with the forms which we believed would determine our future, I felt upset, offended and humiliated. All my other friends who happened to be Malays were given the forms without questions asked.

“Why was I treated differently?” I thought.

The only reason I could think of was the fact that I was the only non-Malay in the group.

As a young, naïve 16-year-old Indian Muslim girl, the incident left a scar on my pride.

The courage to speak up

A few weeks later, my school organised an event where a few officers from the Education Department were invited to give a talk to students sitting for SPM. I sat among my schoolmates of various races, attentively listening to all the opportunities available to us once we left Form 5.

At the end of the session, the emcee opened the floor for Q&A. However, no students had any questions to ask. Teachers who thought our silence was not making the school look good began to use hand and facial gestures to demand students to step to the podium with a question.

So I went up the stage, took my place behind the podium, and asked the only one question that had been bugging me.

“All of us study in the same school, we have the same teachers, we use the same books and we sit for the same exam. Why then do we have different allocations when it comes to opportunities for higher learning? Don’t we deserve the same opportunity?”

One of the officers then took the stage and made some meaningless statement in his attempt to answer my question.

After the event, I was called to the office and given a long lecture about how I had brought shame to the school by asking what was deemed to be an inappropriate question.

“Do not be shocked if you end up blacklisted and don’t receive any opportunities after your SPM,” the teacher responsible for Student Affairs warned me.

At 16, I didn't quite understand what I had done wrong. In all honesty, I asked a truthful question, one which created tension in my school, but never answered.

Stranded and left behind

A few months later, the SPM result came out, and I was announced as the best student of the school for that year. I soon learned that getting good results was not always a ticket to open doors for better things in life.

While most of my (Malay) friends went on to pursue their studies in and out of the country, including those who received scholarships to study in the US and UK, I continued to write letter after letter, begging for an opportunity.

The opportunity I craved never came. The only thing that came my way were letters of rejection.

I then had to spend a few months in Form 6 only to watch more of my (Malay) friends with Grade 2 results being offered places in local universities.

Moving forward, my dad, who could not bear to see the sadness in me, decided to enrol me in a private college with his clinic assistant salary.

Every time my dad withdrew his hard-earned money to pay for my private college fees and my UK examination fees, I recalled the bitter memories and felt so much rage.

I gradually became closer to my non-Malay friends, whom I saw as my equal. I not only slowly lost contact with my Malay schoolmates, but I also wasn't interested in befriending any Malays, for that matter.

Seeing the Malays somehow made me angry and upset, reminding me of my rightful opportunities snatched.

### Learning to accept Malays

As I grew older, I began to meet good, kind and honest Malays who offered me friendship. However, I found myself having to put in great effort not to stereotype them. But even as I tried all my might to accept the good Malays, once in a while, I still ended up bumping into bad ones who made me resent them collectively even more.

Like a neighbour who pretended to be nice but called me 'mamak' behind my back.

Or like an acquaintance who advised me not to be too close to my Chinese friends because they do not shower often.

Or like a ustaz who ignored my children when they were called degrading names just because those calling them were a bunch of Malay kids.

Or like a teacher at my children's school who instructed the Muslim kids not to mix with the non-Muslim kids or else they would make God upset.

Over the years, I watched my children struggle as they grew up in their brown Indian skin – their journey seemed very similar to mine. I kept wondering if they too will have opportunities snatched from them because they are not the preferred race. My resentment only grew stronger.

I believe we all have our own stories which shape our mind, our perception and our attitude. I do try to be a better person, a better human being, one who sees another without prejudice. At 47, I am still a work in progress.

Today, most of my friends are non-Malays. I find it easier to trust them. I feel we are on the same bandwagon.

As for my Malay friends, I filter them carefully. I choose not to trust completely

until they have proven their worth as a friend. But even then, I cannot see us as equal. I just can't.

Forming a unified identity

As long as there is different treatment between the Malays and the non-Malays in this beloved country of ours, there will always be an invisible line segregating us. We will never be equals.

This has nothing to do with how we eat, how we dress, how we celebrate our festivities or the language we use in our schools as perceived by some people.

We do not need to give up on chopsticks, sarees, lion dance or our mother tongue to be unified. Being true to ourselves and keeping our racial identities doesn't mean we are any less Malaysian.

We do not need meaningless government campaigns chanting about big happy Malaysian families while continuously practising a system that places us in different boxes.

We also do not need any leaders blaming us for keeping our minority cultures close to our hearts and not adopting the culture of the majority when they are to

be blamed for failing to play a substantial role in assimilating the Malaysian family.

When Malaysians are treated as equals, respected as equals and receive equal opportunities, that is when we can proudly say that we have taken the first step towards forming a unified identity.

Until then, we will remain as a family, but not really a family.

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