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Malaysia: “The poor will always be among us.”

Wednesday 11 December 2019, by [CHIN Juliet](#), [FIKRI Fadiyah Nadwa](#) (Date first published: 19 December 2018).

Juliet Chin, the first woman to be elected as President of the University of Singapore Students’ Union (USSU) in early 1974 was notorious for speaking truth to power. When she was studying architecture at the University of Singapore in the 70s, she was actively involved in organizing students to stand up for the oppressed and the marginalized. As a result of her radical activism, she was expelled by the University of Singapore and subsequently detained without trial under the draconian Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) for a year. She was also forced to seek asylum in France and give up her Malaysian citizenship. Here Malaysia Muda shares an interview with Juliet Chin by Fadiyah Nadwa Fikri.

Fadiyah: Could you share with us a little bit about your childhood? What was it like growing up? What books did you read and what shaped your politics?

Juliet: My mother had me, her first child at 30, which was considered late in those years following the end of the Second World War. She had wanted only one child. Though she had just a few years of Chinese education because of the Japanese invasion of Malaya, she was modern enough at that time to have gone to a doctor for a birth control sheath! Luckily for me, she had another child - my sister - in 1957, six years younger than me. This was upon the wise advice of my maternal grandmother who saw even then, that I was too headstrong and could not be counted upon, to remain at my mother’s side in her old age. And so it was. My sister narrated that to me after my mother had passed away.

Like most families in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second World War and resumption of colonial exploitation by the British, we were poor. There was little economic activities, not to mention almost no job opportunities for women. Nevertheless, I was sheltered at all times from hunger or homelessness by my parents. This is already a precious childhood, cruelly denied to millions of children on this earth.

I would credit my father as being modern too for his time. After all, with patriarchy still raging among overseas Chinese communities, it was rare for a man to be content with two daughters. China was only recently liberated in 1949 and its policy of gender equality had not quite filtered down to the overseas Chinese. On my part, I was delighted not to have any brothers. Frankly with the scarce resources - kais pagi makan pagi, kais petang makan petang - I would definitely not have gone on to pursue higher education.

My parents made a pact that they would not argue or fight, break down in tears or scream in hysteria in front of the children. So I was never traumatized as a child. I believe that stood me in good stead when I faced the crisis of my arrest and interrogation under the ISA. I simply went to sleep soundly every night in my tiny mosquito-infested cell!

Books? We had very few at home. There was *The Dream of The Red Chambers* in Chinese of my father. I was being educated in English. Years later, in university I read it in English. It was even more years later that I understood it as a portrait of feudal China and noted that women were of little worth in that oppressive society.

Despite our poverty, my father subscribed *The Readers' Digest* for me to improve my English throughout my secondary schooling. I was touched by the care and concern of these Americans for the poor in the Third World. One of these kind hearted souls was trying to invent an iron cow that could process grass to produce milk for malnourished children; another was dispensing vitamins in the hills of Vietnam; and so it went on. By the time I entered university in 1970, I was somewhat troubled that Third World countries still had not stood up on their own two feet.

I read a lot from the convent school library but nothing remarkable; a lot of Enid Bryton which were English adventure or mystery story books for teenagers. However I would say that the Irish nuns running the school did do their bit for feminism. For literature class in Form 4 or 5, the text was "They Dared to Be Doctors" - a tale of two English women who ventured into the male dominated medical field.

My political concepts of both class and gender are homegrown. Perhaps it is more fitting that I elaborate on them in the following question.

Fadiyah: Arundhati Roy once said "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." Throughout history, women have always been at the heart of social movements but their voices and stories remain unheard. Men continue to dominate the space - book covers, public forums, news headlines, politics. What do you make of this reality? Why is it important for women to have seats at the table?

Juliet: Why is it important for women to have seats at the table! You could not have phrased it more aptly. You may be surprised that Mao Zedong put it in almost exactly the same language when at a meeting (I think pre-liberation of China), he called on the women to come into the room and boldly put their bottoms onto the seats! Occupy the seats with your bums! It was as crude as that. I was stunned by Mao's language. But that is just what we have to do to claim what is rightfully ours.

I did not have to learn class or gender oppression from Marxism or the women's liberation movement. Everything was homegrown for me. My rich aunt whose company employed my father never let us forget our different class positions. She would lecture my mother on how much money our family had borrowed from her husband until my mother fainted. That is how I grew to be a fighter at 10 years old; literally forcing out my squeaking voice against her as I struggled to hold up my mother.

My rich aunt was particularly demeaning towards women who were pregnant before marriage. She would even embarrass the poor innocent girl-child of the so-called waywardness of her mother. But she let the men in these relationships off scot-free. What is this ceremony or certificate called marriage that can sanctify consensual sexual intercourse and bestow respectability to women? My young mind saw only hypocrisy.

Agnes Smedley wrote in her autobiography, "Daughter of Earth" that her respectably married mother had to depend on her father who did not earn enough to feed or fend for the children. Agnes' childhood was cold and hungry but for the monies provided by her aunt, who ironically was an independent woman working as a prostitute.

Fadiyah: As a student activist, you were actively involved in organizing students to challenge power

and amplify marginalized voices. You were 22 when you were elected as President of the University of Singapore Students' Union (USSU). You protested against the university authorities and the government of the day. You protested against the forced eviction of poor families in Tasek Utara, Johor Bahru. In a world defined by individualism, we are often told to choose security and not rock the boat. What motivated you to stand up for something that was unpopular, risky, something that would attract a lot of hate mail?

Juliet: Ironically, what motivated me in the early days was the influence of Christianity. I went to, I would say, the best Convent school. It was in Johore Bahru and run by the Irish nuns. Perhaps they felt their own oppression under the British. They never proselytized and except for one or two, none of us were converted! Truly to serve humanity was to serve God. Here I wish to pay my tribute to Sister Xavier, the principal. She has since passed away. A principal who respected and trusted her young students. We did not have to produce medical letters; when we had our periods, we could go to her office and tell her and she would let us go home or sleep in the library sofa.

Subsequently, I went to Johore Bahru English College to do my Form 6. Then already it was renamed Maktub Sultan Abu Bakar (alma mater of Dr Syed Husin Ali as well as Dr Maszlee Malik, our current Minister of Education). We were so overloaded with homework that the class felt that we had to tell the principal that we could not cope. However we all feared him. Our two class prefects then called for volunteers to go with them to present our case to the principal. Believe me, I struggled within myself for the courage to confront this man. The image that propelled me was Christ in the temple, pushing out the money lenders which was an act against the establishment.

I was in Upper Six when May 13, 1969 happened. Johore Bahru was spared. But my father was working in Kuala Lumpur; later he told me that his fellow workers and he were sharpening spears and other instruments for defence in case of attack. They were holed up in their boss' lorry repair workshop at Segambut.

At 18 years of age, I had no analysis of why May 13 happened. However, I refused to accept any chauvinistic racial explanation of Malays against Chinese or vice versa. In fact, I later welcomed the New Economic Policy of positive discrimination towards the Malays as a group (until it was patently abused to serve rich Malays). At the tip of the Malayan peninsula, next to Singapore, the Chinese in Johore Bahru were inevitably drawn to Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, especially after May 13 - as a protector of ethnic Malaysian Chinese. Not a few did migrate to become Singaporeans, even among my family members. Lee stirred up quite a lot of hot air among Malaysian Chinese during the short period 1963-65 when Singapore was part of Malaysia. The acrimonious separation in 1965 with Lee's parting racist shouts, disingenuously disguised as "Malaysian Malaysia" - later picked up by DAP (Democratic Action Party) which was a clone of the People Action Party (PAP) - had wrought incalculable damage to our national unity until GE14 when DAP finally joined the coalition government. Surprisingly, at 18 years old then with all these conversations swirling around me, I was not attracted to a Chinese-led Singapore. I had faith then, and still have, in our multi-ethnic groups that we shall build a nation based on unity in diversity.

I entered the University of Singapore in 1970 at 19 years old. Of course, I knew nothing of politics - it was forbidden to discuss politics in school. So I grew up apolitical. To enter the University of Singapore, I had to fill up a Suitability of Certificate form. I filled it up without knowing anything of its history or significance. Only years later did I know it as an instrument of oppression. [1]

As a second year Architecture student, I came face to face with academic injustice. Half of my class had been failed (I was not among them) in a minor subject, yet we had all handed in similar drawings as we had discussed the questions together. I was appalled at the discrimination meted out to students coming from the Chinese language stream generally. We called for academic justice; we

called for boycott of classes. I still recall, as twenty seven or so of us sat round the big drawing tables (pre-computer aided design days), the question that went round each and every one of us was: can we afford not to graduate? Such was the gravity to take a stand. I did not graduate. My economically poor parents paid the price of my stand. Yet, in a twist of irony, it was for them that I took this stand for I felt that they had been so discriminated against all their lives as poor working class people, robbed of dignity in a society without any safety net and reduced to begging from rich relatives during hard times.

I was the accidental student leader of 1974. Late 1973, the students' union of the University of Singapore was caught up in intrigues and stratagems as one group or another tried to unseat the incumbent controlling the union, which had reduced itself to squabbles over a swivel leather-seat chair, student leaders travel privileges, etc. A position in USSU (The University of Singapore Students Union) was basically sought for as an exercise for oratorical debating skills and a stepping stone to a parliamentary career. It was an ivory tower instead of an instrument to serve the people whose sweat and toil funded our university education.

I stumbled into that position. Late one afternoon of January 3, 1974, I made my way to the Bukit Timah campus where an EOGM (Extra Ordinary General Meeting) was being held to pass a motion of non-confidence on the incumbent student leaders. After a considerable time of trading petty accusations between the two sides, I felt fed up and put up my hand to speak; I heard shouts from the lecture hall, "Let her speak, let her speak." So I was given the floor. I spoke briefly, beseeching the students to note the many problems confronting the orientation of our education system and our role in society. Then I touched on a very raw nerve among the student body - that of "special students" (i.e. government agents) on our campus whose very presence intimidated the general student body. It was the first time that a topic, whispered about, had been brought out to the open. There was resounding applause. And another shout from the hall, Let us vote her into the next student council or something to this effect. And so it came to pass that I was voted in as the president of the interim student council of six or so councilors, with the immediate task of convening through elections, the 28th student union.

Misogyny toward the first women elected as president of the 28th University of Singapore Students Union? It certainly existed, painfully for me right within my inner circle but was muted at that time. My fateful accidental intervention at the EOGM had, so I found out decades later, disrupted other plans to put in a male leader, who though nominated for the interim council, was unfortunately not voted in during that EOGM.

But in the aftermath of January 3, 1974, I was unfazed. Young, inexperienced and ignorant of politics and past history, I was completely overwhelmed by the immensity of the work before me and my colleagues to whom I have to pay tribute for I am nothing without them - my core group from the Faculty of Architecture (welded by the struggle for academic justice) and the support from the Chinese Society and the Malay Society of the university (the disadvantaged students in an English speaking university) as well as from the residential colleges.

January 3, 1974 put my life on a trajectory from which there was no return.

Tasik Utara is a very special experience. One can read of it as a struggle for land for housing by rural Malays migrating to the fringes of towns in the first half of the 1970s. What past economic policies of Malaya, independent in 1957 and later of Malaysia, with its New Economic Policies since 1969, drove this rural exodus? Whatever the causes, there they were, the poor landless Malay families, occupying the proposed golf course of Tasik Utara in Johore Bahru!

As the University of Singapore was closer, answering the call from the students in Kuala Lumpur, we

were the first to go over to Tasik Utara before they got there. This was the kind of solidarity we had, among the student bodies.

Later, one of the charges against me under the ISA, was that I had shown slides of the Tasik Utara struggles to other Malay kampungs in Johore Bahru. Slides are but poor forerunner of the sophisticated cellphone videos of today. Yet the weak power of the alternative media had to be silenced.

I recall a Malay woman leader of the Tasik Utara struggle. After my release and I got home to my mother's tiny flat in a public high-rise housing estate (since demolished) behind the old Johore Bahru railway station, there was a mint plant. Now in those days, it was a rare plant outside of cool areas like Cameron Highlands. This Malay woman had sought out, on her own, my mother - a Chinese woman - and given her this plant while I was imprisoned in Kamunting Detention Centre in Perak. This gesture of hers rewards and strengthens my enduring faith in our multi ethnic society.

There was also Majid of Parti Rakyat at the Tasik Utara struggle. He was detained under the ISA. I was told that after his release he returned to work as a construction worker. Sadly, he died from a work accident quite early. These are the unsung heroes of the people movement.

During the Tasik Utara struggle, I had represented USSU to present a protest to the Malaysian High Commissioner in Singapore. Of course, he did not deign to receive the small delegation. My younger sister, still studying in the Convent School of Johore Bahru, said to me that her classmate, a daughter of the HC, had told her to advise me not to return to Malaysia as I would be arrested. I was incredulous - what crimes have I committed?

Perhaps, we were luckily in those "backward" days with no social media or the pressure of hate mail could have taken its toll on me. I could only recall a rather "flattering" cartoon of me, bespectacled and pony-tailed, riding astride an unwieldy elephant with an USSU tag on its bum, after being elected into the interim council of USSU at the lobby space of the Faculty of Architecture. This sarcastic caricature had come from one of our second year classmates who had opposed the academic justice struggle. It was a minuscule group but the line had been drawn between us.

It was not easy at home too. My father, on one of his rare annual visits home from Kuala Lumpur where he worked, so perhaps it was Chinese New Year, tried reasoning with me to take a backseat position in the student movement. "Let others be in the front; just follow from behind". "But what if everyone takes a back seat?" I retorted. It was a disagreement so sharp that I felt my integrity demanded that I leave home. I returned to Singapore where I was still an enrolled student. It was a very lonely moment. Luckily, a month or so later, I received a letter from my father asking me to go home and see my mother, who was unwell. It was his way of admitting he had crossed the line with me.

Fadiah: You were expelled from the University of Singapore and subsequently detained without trial under the repressive Internal Security Act 1960. Could you share with us what led to the expulsion and detention under the ISA?

Juliet: I think the activities of the University of Singapore Students Union in 1974 had been rather well documented in our various publications, some of which may be online or should be online soon. We changed the culture of the student union; during orientation week, we abolished ragging and did not stage the Freshie Queen Beauty contest. Instead we held camps for the new students to get to know disadvantaged communities. We challenged the Singapore government's bus fare hike with a massive public signature campaign; we worked together with all the other unions of higher tertiary education in Singapore - Nanyang University, Singapore Polytechnic and Ngee Ann College; I was

amazed at the lack of elitism from the Polytechnic and Ngee Ann (as compared to us in the university), and revitalized by their energy and enthusiasm. We held talks and forums to which we invited, among others, Chandra Muzaffar and Dr Poh Soo Kai (during his first release after 11 years). Then came the Tasik Utara landless urban poor struggle in Johore Bahru; we supported the Baling peasants' demonstration in Kedah; we supported the retrenched workers of American Marine and set up the Retrenchment Research Centre in USSU. Then 1974 abruptly ended for me with my expulsion on December 11 together with four other student leaders of Malaysian nationality on the eve of the trial of Tan Wah Piow, the president who succeeded me in USSU, for rioting - a frame-up to destroy Singapore student activism. Across the causeway, our fraternal students unions faced similar repressive actions as police swept into campuses and beat up students, including women in the residential colleges and mass arrest of student demonstrators took place outside the Kuala Lumpur national mosque.

Upon being expelled from Singapore, we were handed directly over to the Malaysian Special Branch at the Johore Bahru causeway. Detention under the ISA was another milestone in my life. It would take a long chapter to narrate that experience and how it shaped me thereafter. Certainly, an invaluable lesson in oppression in the struggle for justice and peace. I only wished it had not been so painful for my parents.

Fadiyah: You had to seek asylum in France and give up your Malaysian citizenship. Could you tell us what it was like to have been on such steep, winding roads?

Juliet: A French speaking lawyer in Brussels once noted of me that I had never unpacked my bags! And perhaps that was a true description of me during my sejour abroad. I never put down roots. I was just passing.

Yet, the reality demanded that I kept myself alive. A bread and butter issue. Landing in France in April 1982 when it was still proud to be a land of asylum, it had not been too difficult for me. I believe there was a stipend amounting to half of the minimum wage for the first six months. But for a person like me, who had almost always carried my own home-packed lunch and water, and walked the mile so as to save on public transport, there was no complaint. My only sense of guilt was my inability to contribute to my old parents' well-being. Luckily, my sister was there for them and there was never a harsh word from them. On the contrary, they were concerned for me.

I had to quickly learn French and enrolled in the University of Paris VIII to complete a bachelor for I had been expelled from the University of Singapore without completing my degree. More accurately, I was a failed Architecture student in my final fifth year.

In a way, I was grateful not to have landed in the UK where Margaret Thatcher was enjoying her second term and ushering in neoliberalism, destroying the post Second World War social security system in place in the UK. It was a shock to me to see poor young white women in the cold winter streets of suburban London, homeless with their babies.

Continental Europe and France may present challenges in terms of being non-English speaking. But to be rid of being English-centric is to reap an abundant harvest intellectually. Claudine Salmon, wife of Deny Lombard (the French Indonesian expert) but an insightful researcher in her own rights, once remarked that English-centric countries like Malaysia expect all white people to speak English. Such is our narrow outlook. As for Deny Lombard, it was painful to see his work circumscribed by the dictator Suharto, who with American blessing, had massacred 500,000 to a million souls right at our doorstep in 1965.

France was also the country where the students and workers movement of May 1969 began and

raged across Europe. In fact, it was a cultural revolution in France. Women teachers won the liberty not to wear their hair in a bun nor to wear stockings instead of pants during cold winter days! The public universities were thrown open to the poor (though a two track system existed with the polytechnic for the elites continuing to run); school fees were negligible, and mothers and older persons welcomed back to school. The elitist graduation ceremony of gown and cap was also abolished.

The ESCAR executions hung over Malaysia when I arrived in France and I threw myself headlong into campaigns against it. A 14 year old boy had, allegedly, been found with a pistol and due to hang. Malaysian and Singapore friends working through KHEMAS (Malaysia-Singapore Human Rights workgroup) lobbied the European Parliament. French human rights NGOs lent a helping hand. As did the journalist Patrice de Beer of Le Monde, whom I had met in the home of Usman Awang, where I had stayed for several months, upon my release from Kamunting Detention Camp. Later, we organized for the FIDH (Federation internationale des droits de l'homme - International Federation of Human Rights) to go on a fact finding mission to Malaysia. It produced a report which I still have. The delegation was badly harassed by pro-government elements.

Of course, any description of my *sejour* in France would be incomplete without mentioning the comrades of The Indonesian Restaurant at rue Vaugirard in Paris where I worked for a couple of years part-time as a waitress; and also of the Filipino comrades fleeing Marcos whom I helped to settle in Paris. Today they have an autobiographical account of their struggle called "Subversive Lives" which I am told would be produced as a film. I learnt much from them and their struggles. Again, this short paragraph cannot do justice to the immense solidarity I experienced from them and many other quarters as a refugee and exile.

Fadiyah: Why did you return to Malaysia?

Juliet: It is home. This is the land I was born in, grew up in; I wished I knew it better, wish I had made more contributions towards it.

As an ethnic Chinese Malaysian (though some Caribbean ancestry runs in the family, so it is whispered), how do I feel at being rejected as a *pendatang*? Yet even among Chinese, I was rejected as being English-speaking and not literate enough in Chinese. I had thought long and hard on these issues and by the time I was 10 or 12, I knew, unapologetically that I am Malaysian and Chinese mostly.

Likewise, on the issue of racism which I reject - another homegrown reaction to my rich aunt who was also very racist and mocked the cultures of all others as inferior to the Han people of the Middle Kingdom. I saw that the top leaders of the component racial-based parties of the Alliance, which later morphed into the Barisan Nasional, got along very well; so why are we divided at the bottom along race and religion lines?

I entered primary school in 1957 - year of our country's *merdeka* (independence). I still recall our enthusiasm at wanting to learn the national language, our excitement at reading the monthly Dewan Pelajar; how we looked forward to the growth of the Malay language and its standardization with the Indonesian language conducted by Dewan Pustaka and its counterpart in Indonesia which all came to a sad end with *Konfrontasi* in 1963. We were a nation in the making then. Today, after a long hiatus and set back, I hope Malaysians can move forward on the path of nation building, wiser and more tolerant, with the democratic space won in GE14.

I cannot fight other peoples' causes (not like, for example, some American youth or celebrities who call for the liberation of Tibet, while neglecting the struggles of their own Native Americans.)

The only other cause that I feel comfortable in must be women's liberation. Yet one can feel "Foreign in Feminism" [2] too when it is hijacked by white feminism.

I have lived and worked in 4 continents and Malaysia is still where my heart is.

Fadiyah: Without a doubt the treatment you were subjected to was cruel, inhumane, and degrading. In the face of such adversity you persevered. What kept you going? What advice would you share with people who are trying to breathe life into justice and freedom?

Juliet: The poor will always be among us. They do not have our choice, as intellectuals, to give up the struggle and make a come-back to a comfortable middle-class life. After the Tian An Men incident of 1989 in Beijing, Chinese dissident students fled to America and Europe where they were feted as heroes for democracy. When the money ran out, they descended into chaos and were seized by a "must make a come-back mentality". A disgraceful sight to behold. When I sought political asylum in France, something similar was voiced in the vein of "If you do not make it back at 30, you cannot make it back" among my circle. Alas, it was too late for me. I was already 31 and did not even possess neither a basic bachelor degree that could be marketable in a foreign speaking country nor deep pockets from families or supporters. No way I can make this so-called comeback, no matter how ruthlessly I go about it. So, it was not even an option.

Friends are precious and even more so, should be one's comrades. Unfortunately, as Augustus Caesar said of Brutus, "This is the unkindest cut of them all". At least Brutus was sincere in his motivation. These stabs will come. Can we weather them or give up the struggle in bitterness?

Of course, as women in the struggle we also face misogyny from some male colleagues and comrades. They will not admit to it; that they consider our arguments to be of lighter weight; or that they resort to calumnies against us. "She likes to boast" has been carelessly thrown at me.

There will be contradictions among friends and comrades. And we do not have to feel sentimental.

As for the enemy's cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, once we have chosen our path, (the path less travelled as Robert Frost wrote), we will persist. My consciousness or worldview has been achieved at such a great price to myself and my parents. It is so precious that were I to relive my life, I would still walk this path.

There have been many helping hands all along the way extended to me and my parents and sister - to them all, I am eternally grateful. I can only repay their trust by not letting them down.

And the fact that there is a whole new generation of Malaysian youth today who search and struggle for a dignified future for all regardless of race or religion in Malaysia is sufficient vindication for me that I can die now, happy! I have faith that your coming makes this world a better place.

Fadiyah Nadwa Fikri
Juliet Chin

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P.S.

Malaysia Muda

<https://malaysiamuda.wordpress.com/2018/12/19/the-poor-will-always-be-among-us-an-interview-with-juliet-chin/>

Footnotes

[1] The Straits Times, The Student Screen, 14 July 1964

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19640714-1.2.66.1>

[2] Maivân Clech Lâm, Feeling Foreign in Feminism, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1994 19:4, 865-893