

PARTICLE

UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE

PARTICLE UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE • SPRING 2020

PARADOX

ISSUE 13 | SUMMER 2022



University of Nottingham
Malaysia Campus

PARTICLE

UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE

Particle is an online literary magazine run by the students of the University of Nottingham Malaysia.

Established in 2013, Particle publishes biannually, committed to providing a platform to amplify the voices of both emerging and established writers and artists.

The work contained in this magazine does not necessarily represent the opinions and views held by the Particle staff or any member of the University of Nottingham Malaysia.

Submission information can be found at particlelitmag.wixsite.com/site

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Poetry | Fiction | Creative Nonfiction | Artworks & Photographs
Spring 2022 | University of Nottingham, Malaysia

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Editors' Note

Dear Reader,

Paradox: a statement that seems to contradict itself but may nonetheless be true. This is the theme that we have chosen for our Issue #13. We felt that the theme was broad and yet specific enough (funnily, a paradox here also) that everyone could relate to it. Most things in life, although we may not realise it, are paradoxical and as writers, it is certainly intriguing to explore.

For this issue, we have some Poetry and Fiction & Creative Non-Fiction pieces for you. We hope you enjoy reading the writings as much as we did.

Love & Light,
Particle: UNMC Literary Magazine

DISCLAIMER NOTE:

We, the Co-Editors in Chief for Particle Magazine's 21/22 term, would love to give you our biggest thanks for being here with us. This disclaimer is meant to highlight the pre-existence of this issue. All works that have been curated and edited within this issue were done by the magazine's previous teams. Although it was previously lost in an unfortunate incident, we managed to recover this issue, and a few others—deciding to republish them. We tried to maintain the novelty of this issue, and sincerely apologise for any errors, omissions, missing works and/or authors, that might have occurred.

Thank you.

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She Is A Stranger

Nayli Nasran | Poetry

I must utter, to those I allow space in my head, whose own never allows me the same,

They are awe-struck by an idol I concocted as an image of myself.

She has aged and gone to places I never will visit alive.

She has skin to peel off, worth more than I have in 10 lifetimes.

She is president, a princess, a popstar, a pioneer.

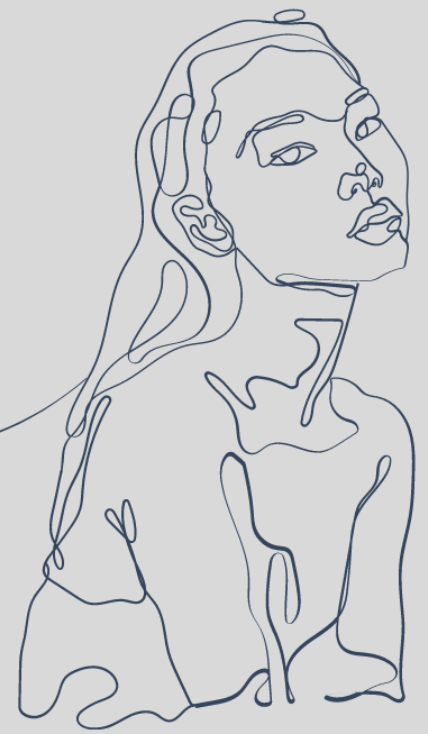
Playing the roles required of her, roles fueled by my own insecurity.

She is who I thought I would be,

but the person she is based on remains still,

traveling no further than the comfort of her soil burrow.

She is here and she is a goddess, while I, a peasant.



I look onto my creation and wonder if I took my own breath
when I breathed life into her.

I am a shell, I am empty, and she is not real. She is not me. She is a stranger.

I am the primordial, she is the projection.

She is immortal, but I am corporeal.

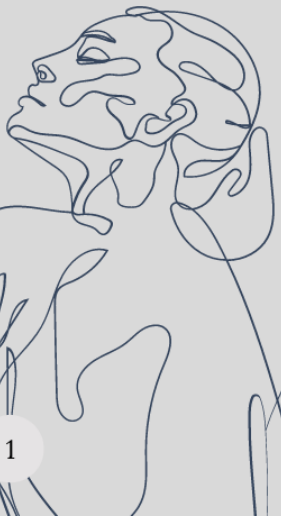
Not subjected to the laws of the earth, she triumphs.

She holds onto me, burying me in a cellar.

She comforts me with her cyanide, killing me softly as I wither.

She and I can co-exist, but on different planes of existence.

She is me, and I am she. But she is a stranger.



Mist of my Mind

Nadine MS | Poetry

I like to think of our minds as a home. So tiny
and cozy Like the warmest cottage up upon a
misty hill. A home to bright ideas, light up
within A home of desire, recognition and
emotion And a home that ignites a flame.

A flame that can't be put out
Despite the scream of our thoughts
The scream of our pain -- The
scream of silence.

Up on that misty hill is a fog Sometimes - we
can't see clear. The universe and our
subconscious intertwine They exhale a misty
fume Like two ropes unknowingly knotted
Bound to make you trip.

We're clouded --

We think it's time to fly away into passion and love We hid in
the darkness with a beating heart. We say the wounds that cut
deep all those years ago have healed We say as we see the
blood dripping. We knew it was time to soar Into open doors
bursting with the smell of opportunity But we froze still on the
cold marble.

We swarm in a fiction of utopia, seemingly the
truth Reality kicks in -- We drown in the dystopia
of a contradicting mind. I'm stuck in a cottage up
on the misty hills.

Adoption: *Pongo pygmaeus* and *Homo sapiens*

Christina Yin | Non-Fiction

"During these six years, I've counted about four babies born naturally and one dead."

After more than three decades working in various capacities within the Sarawak Forest Department, Dominic Helan Eric is now working as a Park Warden at Semenggoh Wildlife Centre, about 40 minutes drive from Kuching, Sarawak's capital city. He recalls how one of the keepers managed to snatch the dead baby from its mother. How she would have carried it around despite the rot and the flies, till she was just cradling skin and hair. The keepers and wardens knew this because it had happened before. Then there's the story about Salina. Dominic describes how her mother, Delima was killed when Salina was still young. Salina's older sister, Endu looked after her – even breastfed her. There was no milk; young Salina suckled for comfort. The keepers fed her soft bananas and today, Salina survives, living semi-wild at Semenggoh with her sister-surrogate mother.

At Semenggoh Nature Reserve, orang-utan mothers have been observed stretching their arms and legs like impossibly flexible yogis to grasp branches far apart, so their young can climb across their brown-red-haired bodies. They teach them what they know: where and what to forage for food and how to turn pokey branches and prickly leaves into comfortable nests. Orangutan Project founder Leo Biddle has witnessed Chiam, a moody semi-wild female orang-utan, teaching the newly rescued young ones how to make nests in the forest at Matang Wildlife Centre. Chiam would "babysit" the youngsters, so that instead of a clumsy, weak human like Leo teaching them how to make a messy nest, Chiam would spend half an hour with a little one, bending and shaping the branches and leaves into a comfortable nest as only an orang-utan would be able to, with her strength and dexterity.

Although Chiam would never fully adopt the rescued youngsters, Leo had watched her devote some time to teach them skills that the human keepers could not. It is true that she could neither tolerate them for long nor allow them to nest with her, but Chiam was the closest thing to a natural mother these orphans had. Leo believes rehabilitation can only work with as little influence as possible from us humans, no matter how well-meaning we are. The reality is that a semi-attentive orang-utan would make a better surrogate mother than any well-intentioned human keeper.

Scientists say that in the wild, orang-utans are mostly solitary apes, with the strongest bonds forming between mother and offspring. Here at Semenggoh Nature Reserve, a mere 653-hectare patch of Sarawakian rainforest, an unnatural semi-wild colony of rescued orphaned orang-utans and their offspring survive. It is here that the wardens and keepers are able to observe orang-utans caring for the orphans that are thrust into their midst. Yet our newspapers keep telling us that newborn human babies are found dead or left for dead in toilet bowls or rubbish bins. Dominic says simply: *"Humans dump their babies in drains, but orang-utans look after orphans."* We see that they do, even though they themselves have lost their mothers and grown up under the influence of their biped cousins, mimicking their alien behaviour for better or worse.

In 2018, there were 1,075 cases of baby dumping reported in Malaysia. Ironically, semi-wild female orang-utans at the Semenggoh and Matang Wildlife Centres care for the abused orphans that are rescued from poachers feeding the illegal pet trade that continues to thrive around the world. Oddly enough, we ourselves can become these abused orphans' adoptive parents quite easily. Today, Semenggoh Wildlife Centre offers orang-utans for adoption. Indeed, many humans pay 200 ringgit a year to Semenggoh Wildlife Centre to adopt an orang-utan. It seems our semi-wild red ape cousins in the forest, free from the confines of cages and cement enclosures, is not enough for many visitors. They would like to contribute to the orphaned orang-utans' rehabilitation and to ensure good conservation work is done to keep wild orang-utans safe in their natural habitats.

It is with these thoughts swirling in my mind that I watch the young female orang-utan climb down a tree, her infant clutching her tightly as she slowly makes her way to the second feeding platform, which is located deeper into the nature reserve bordering Semenggoh Wildlife Centre. And I ask myself if it would be better to be born an orang-utan or a human being in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo today in the 21st century.



I Love Myself

Lilian Angelia | Poetry

i love myself
but i can't seem to understand
why i should love myself
but i shall not question it

i love myself
but i don't nourish my skin
flesh bone blood body mind soul
but i still do wish to wash away my sin

i feed my stomach enough to starve myself
i push myself enough to beat myself up
i inhale every breath to compare myself
i keep holding on again to tell myself

that i love myself
but i can't seem to understand
why shouldn't i hate myself
the enemy i befriended in the womb

so i expand the tale

reinvent the curse of human's ancestry
the 21st-century type of love
the fruits of the narcissus tree
with the water too grey to see

he needed to love others
in the end he could only love himself
i needed to love myself
and now i could only love others

so i repeat again

i love myself
(but never the reflection in the mirror)
i love myself
(but never the things that i do)
i love myself
(but never the way that i am)
i love myself
but never

Passing

Lancelan Pegan | Fiction

The neon lights glimmered out into the ocean. Their reflections shimmered as the tide pulled the water in and out again. The gentle waves broke as Kiyong threw a bottle cap into it, with a sigh.

Ever since the first day he made a home for himself in Singapore, he'd escape to this spot in Bedok to get away from the bustle. It reminded him of home somewhat. The seaside front always felt more familiar to him. It felt like the Kuching waterfront. It had almost the same story: a small bazaar that slowly grew with the city around it until the money went to other parts of the city, leaving it a run-down husk of what it once was. Bedok felt vaguely like home, if only wider and a tad noisier.

Tonight though, it barely provided any solace for him. His body was grounded on a bench in East Coast Park but his mind was somewhere, adrift, in the middle of the South China Sea.

The week started with a lunch time phone call. He had been rushing to squeeze in some food before he needed to get back to work. The number that lit up his phone screen was unfamiliar, but the appended +60 told him everything he needed to know about where the call came from.

He heard a soft, familiar across the line.

"Kiyong, Dad's not doing so well."

His sister's voice quivered slightly as she said that.

Kiyong barely knew what to say back. He could only mutter 'I see's and only signed off with a "Let me know if anything comes up.".

When the call ended, he laid back in his seat and gazed off into the distance. The flies hovering around made a small home out of his chicken rice before he came to his senses.

This scene played itself out again and again, through the week. Nila kept updating Kiyong about Dad's state; one day, it'd be improving, the next, there would be some other complication or misfiring in his body that the doctors would be scrambling to get to.

He appreciated Nila reaching out to him. It was something familiar to hold onto, as the world around him seemed to speed up in a blur. It started to feel grounding, like he finally had his feet on dry land for once.

Then, the final call came in. He heard his phone ring just as he walked through his apartment door.

The first thing he heard was Nila's sobbing. He sat himself down, trying to comfort her over the phone. She composed herself, then broke the news to Kiyong.

It was some rare, one-in-a-million condition; something terminal. His father was going home to let himself rest peacefully.

That night, he booked the first flight out, and got ready a bag to return home. After triple-checking everything he needed, he went to bed.

Ten minutes of restless lying later, he got up and went to his spot, if only to clear his head.

Sitting there, looking out towards the darkness of the Singapore Strait, the lapping waves only pulled him back to his predicament. It had been five years. Kiyong wasn't sure what coming home meant, especially under these circumstances. He tried to go over what he could recall from the past, mildly distressed by how little seemed to come back to him, even after a while. He tried to think of things to say, how to face his family after being away for so long.

I meant to come home sooner, but I never got the chance to.

He knew he couldn't say such a bold-faced lie to his father's face. He knew he relished the distance away from his pastoral upbringing, his days of running through fields of paddy. He knew, deep down, a part of him wished to never return.

Kiyong mulled it over, going over endless permutations of words in his head like a mantra. By the time he finished his bottle of beer, he still hadn't figured the words out. Everything he tried to come up with had some air about it; something that felt disingenuous, vapid. He tapped on his phone. It was almost midnight. The last train was probably going to leave soon.

Disposing his drink, he made his way home, tired from the journey there. He had another journey ahead of him in the morning, and he wanted to be ready for whatever may come his way. Reaching his apartment, he saw messages from his sister about everything he needed to know: how to get to the kampung from the city, what he needed to do once Dad had passed away, and all the other do's and don'ts. After he went over the list a few times, he fell into bed, exhausted.

That night, a dream came to him.

He was young again; back in the village. He looked around the veranda of the longhouse. Kiyong recognised the time he was in by the packed suitcase at the end of the bamboo stairs.

Today was the day everything ended.

He knew the words that would've been spewed after this by heart. They'd echoed themselves through his mind every night he spent stuck in a dead-end office in Tampines, every weekend shift he was forced to slog through, every evening he spent gazing out across the sea.

In this dream, he was helpless; only able to witness the scene unfolding before him. He saw the shouting match happening between him and his father.

"Kiyong, don't go off like this..." his father said, a frown starting to form on his face.

The young Kiyong before him barked back.

"Dad, there's no way I'm sticking around! There's nothing for me here!"

He grabbed the suitcase and quickly hauled it over to the car as his father watched on from the veranda.

"Son, I know you're bright but..."

"But what, Dad? What am I supposed to do with my skills out here in the Ulu?"

His father stayed silent hearing his son shout at him.

"I have so much potential! You've seen what I can do, what I can achieve; why can't you just let me be?"

The young Kiyong simply got into his car. Before leaving, he winded down his window to deliver one last line to his father.

"I don't ever want to be stuck as some farmer here, when I could actually make a difference in the world somewhere else."

Kiyong was jolted awake by the sound of his alarm. The sheets were thrown off his body from wriggling and writhing in bed. Turning off his alarm, he laid there, taken aback by the dream that had just ended.

It had felt so real again.

He snapped out of his reverie soon enough. Kiyong had to return home, now.

When he got off the tortuous, rickety ride aboard the biplane, the smell of wet paddy brought him back to his roots. Making his way out of the small airport, he reminisced more and more as the scenery changed from cleared out grasslands to thick forests cut by narrow paths.

He saw the river; the place where he first learned to fish. His father had taught him how to arrange the stones in the river so that it would funnel everything through the rattan bubu they made. He remembered the pride on his family's faces as he lifted the trap out of the water, so replete with fish that he struggled to pull it out.

He made a stop to look. The river before him seemed smaller than the one in his memory: shallower, the banks having grown into the river, leaving it a mere stream. The lack of depth let the shafts of sunlight peeking through the trees penetrate through to the bed of the river. Barely any fish could be seen left in the water. He could see a fair number of tadpoles, their silver tails glinting in the mid-day sun. If he strained a little more, he could make out the silhouette of a few bottom-feeding catfish and river shrimp. Regardless, it wasn't the roaring, bustling current it used to be. He pressed on, ready to return.

Kiyong set his foot forward on the old bamboo veranda of his longhouse as the sun began to set. Nila greeted him with a sombre smile and led him in.

The structure jostled slightly, buckling under the presence of this new-found weight. He found it unsettling, how the once-verdant green hue had dried out and left behind a pale, bleached remnant of what it once was.

Finally, setting foot onto the bamboo floor of his longhouse, he thought that he felt prepared to see the scene before him. He thought that the long, arduous trek from his HDB in Singapore to his jungles in the brushlands would have given him enough mental and emotional distance to face everything head-on.

However, as he entered the room, he could feel the atmosphere shift sharply. The windows were now closed, as the sun gave way to nightfall. The only sources of light were a few moth-bitten holes in the nipah ceiling and candles lit around the room. His relatives were there, faces sullen, tired and long. They sat, some cross-legged, some on their side, around the man.

Kiyong's father laid there. Kiyong had thought he would have been ready to face the reality before him. He had heard of the various prognoses, looked up all the guides of what this disease entailed in the people who had been struck by it; but he couldn't help but tear up at the sight of his father. The once-built man in his memories was barely there; replaced by a hollowed-out husk. His body, once full of vigour and life, was now almost ghastly, his ribs seeming to almost poke out of his skin. His face, once joyful, had cheeks that seemed to cling onto their bones like the roots of banyan trees.

All that Kiyong had thought over, all the words he meant to use as a shield went out the window as the situation hit him like a tidal wave. Wiping the tears from his face, Kiyong knelt down beside his father, who was now smiling before the face of his son; finally, his son.

Kiyong turned his eyes to the ground.

“Long time, no see, father.” He murmured the words in his mother tongue, trying to hide his stutters and uncertainty. Even the words leaving his lips felt foreign to him. He could only hope that it meant what his memory told him.

To his surprise, his father mustered a chuckle.

“I’m surprised you even remember a single word, Kiyong.”

He looked up, to see his father holding a weathered, warm smile.

In that very instant, the weight on Kiyong’s shoulders seemed to lift away. A wave of relief washed over him. They began a vivid conversation, as they reminisced about the past, sharing light-hearted stories about Kiyong’s upbringing and childhood. They talked about catching fish in the village river and running around in the thick brush, looking for jungle ferns and fruits. Kiyong laughed as he remembered the days of running through paddy fields and swimming in the small nearby lake.

Soon enough, the conversation shifted to the present. Kiyong’s father asked him about his life in Singapore thus far. Kiyong grew quiet, only answering his questions in broad strokes. When his father talked about what he did in that interim, Kiyong felt the distance between them grow as he sat there. He felt more and more remorseful. How couldn’t he? His father was talking about all the joys and hard times he had had over the last five years, and he wasn’t there. He was nothing but a void in these memories.

As Kiyong’s father tapered off, a heavy silence hung in the air. The chirping of the cicadas outside seemed to ring louder and louder in Kiyong’s ears. The weight on his shoulders seemed to return, like boulders being piled over his back. He knew what he needed to let out to finally rest the burden, once and for all.

“I’m sorry, dad.”

His body shook as the words left his lips.

“I’m sorry that I left you here like this. That I didn’t even say a word back. I just– I didn’t know how to come back. When I left, I... felt proud and said things that I never meant.”

His voice began to crack.

“Then, when the reality of things set in, I didn’t know what to do. I just felt lost and alone in Singapore. I didn’t even feel I could’ve gone back because of everything I sa-”

"It's okay, son. You had some fair points then, either way. The past is in the past; I can't hold things against you." The way his father said those words made Kiyong feel warm.

"I forgive you."

Kiyong broke down in tears, messily uttering grateful and loving words to his father.

"Thank you so much for everything, dad."

After everything settled down, his father let go of all the tension in his body. He reclined more onto his back. His breathing grew raspy, rough, agonal.

Kiyong gripped his hand tightly.

His father whispered out from his lips.

"Thank you, son."

His father let loose the grip on his hand. He set his hand down by his side and closed his eyes.

Kiyong's relatives got up. One of them went over to Kiyong's father's body, reaching towards his neck to feel for a pulse. She turned back to the others in the room, and merely nodded solemnly.

Kiyong's father had finally left, in peace.

Nila quickly wrapped her arms around Kiyong. Kiyong could feel Nila's tears seeping into the fibres of his shirt. He quietly tried to calm her down, while maintaining his own composure. After a few minutes, Nila looked at Kiyong and pulled on him to get up.

Standing around their father's body, they all formed a circle and bowed their heads. A quiet prayer started to be recited. At first, Kiyong felt lost, barely grasping the words being spoken; much less reciting them. Nila glanced at him and began trailing a word behind on the reading, letting Kiyong recite it with her.

As it had finished, Kiyong let go of the circle.

He felt a torrent of tears begin to well up in his eyes. Nila turned her gaze towards him. Her sight seemed to focus on some distant point past Kiyong. Her bleary, bloodshot eyes were plain to see. She moved towards Kiyong to comfort him. Patting his shoulder, Nila said, shakily, "Come, Kiyong, it's time."

At that moment, Kiyong understood. They had to prepare their father's body for the funeral now.

But now, looking at his father's body Kiyong couldn't muster the will to move forwards. He could feel the glares of his relatives bearing down upon him. He knew what they were thinking. They trusted Nila to do what needed to be done, but nobody had confidence in him, especially after what had happened in the years prior.

The pressure he felt almost paralysed him. Kiyong's stomach turned and his muscles began to tense up.

He turned away from Nila and left the room. Before she could even shout out to call him to return, he had descended from the veranda and hit the ground.

He knew he needed to leave. As he felt a ball beginning to form in his throat, he sped up his pace, from a slow walk to a run. The night wind hit his face strongly, whipping his tears into the air. He felt the hard, dry soil beneath him. His bare feet were prodded and poked by every little nettle and weed in the underbrush as he ran. He paid it no mind. He needed distance.

He stopped at the river, with nowhere left to run.

Kiyong collapsed. His tired legs having finally given way, he sat at the riverbank, crying his eyes out. The reality of the situation had hit him.

His father was gone. Even before he passed on, the man that Kiyong held in his memories had left; his death only served to make things final. His childhood had ended. Everything had changed.

As his eyes dried, he turned his gaze upwards. A full moon rose. The stars made their grand arrangements clear in the deep night. The clouds of starlight seemed to glitter and twinkle, like a grand city in the nocturnal sky. He turned to the river.

The eternity of all things made itself fully apparent that night. Millions upon millions of stars made themselves known, their light, shining since time immemorial, splaying itself across the water.

The river started to fill more and more, water from each and every estuary starting to flood and rise up its once-dry banks. As the torrent picked up to a steady current, the gushing of the river became steady, like a pulsing artery in the land. The river had returned to its former glory. The starlight glimmered in the deep artery of the land.

That night, as the flow of the water played with the twinkling of starlight on the surface and the froth of the rushing torrent, the stream became an ocean, full of diamonds. Its starry appearance seemed to sparkle as the water rushed through. The starlight shifted and shimmered as the current passed through, like an awesome wave.

Overgrown Caterpillars

Jude Chong | Poetry

TI am a hopeful person,
I pray on my knees every day
even though I believe in no god.

I wish I could just watch the city burn,
instead of trying to put out every flame.

I desire to feel grounded,
yet why do I feel so trapped?

A roof over my head may be a safeguard,
but I could no longer see the sky.

Maybe I can see it once more if I let the fires burn,
the skies so bold and blue even if it's filled with smoke.

There are mountains to climb,
and oceans to cross.
It's not hard to get a rope or a boat,
then why am I still here?

How do I find answers,
if I seek them from my problems?
Should I circle around them until I get it?
Or are my answers somewhere out there?

Caterpillars can't become butterflies
if they don't shed their skin.
Yet they'll never grow,
if they don't eat leaves from the same tree.

Will they still choose to fly,
if they know they only live for a week?

What is the balance
between the polarity of control and letting go?
I keep getting hurt
when I jump from one to the other.

So I keep praying on my knees,
to no god,
to the mountains and oceans I'll never see,
to the butterflies I'll never become.



A Show of Lights: Shawn Mendes in KL

Nethmi Dimbulana | Essays & Reviews

On the night of October 5th 2019, all of Axiata Arena transformed into a sea of lights when fans, stans, and non-fans alike came together for the Shawn Mendes concert in Kuala Lumpur.

Shawn Mendes is a Grammy-nominated, Canadian pop singer-songwriter who is currently still touring his tour for his self-titled album, Shawn Mendes the album.

After waiting five years to see Shawn Mendes, I am thrilled to say I was not disappointed! Let me start by saying Shawn is one of the few artists who can keep all his songs, including his old ones, fresh and new. He's a true performer in every way and can connect with every single person in the audience- whether you were a hardcore fan or just a parent here to support their kid.

Shawn's work ethic is just as admirable; after travelling from Singapore to Malaysia and arriving at the meet and greet one hour prior, he was still able to put the same effort into this show as he had done throughout his entire tour. Although, I wasn't fortunate enough to attend the meet and greet, and the QnA, I had a few friends who went, and they all came out smiling and screaming. Meanwhile, my friend and I got caught in the horrendous rain that busted out of nowhere, as we were waiting in line to get the official merchandise. The rain was a bummer but hey, it's Malaysia! Are we surprised?

The show started with Lost in Japan, one of Shawn's most admired songs from his self-titled album, and then There's Nothing Holdin' Me Back which everyone danced along to. From old classics such as Stitches and Never Be Alone, to most anticipated performances as Bad Reputation - the start was mind-blowing.

Then we move onto B-stage, where he performed most beloved ballads such as Ruin, and a mash-up from Because I Had You / A Little Too Much / Patience / When You're Ready / Life of the Party.

A mash-up of five songs may sound messy and unorganised, but Shawn and his band have mastered merging the music so that it sounds complete. My seats were at the back of the room, on the 2nd level, which was the perfect spot to watch B-stage, because it looked like he was singing directly to us.

The energy was electrifying during *If I Can't Have You*, and it's an experience I will cherish forever. Everyone was up and out of their seats on the first beat and hobbling up and down during the chorus. Some slower songs were equally as amazing including *Fallin' All in You* (one of my personal favourites), *Why*, and *Youth*. Shawn gave an empowering speech during *Youth*, as the song is about how no matter the pain and the never-ending violence we experience in this world, it's about how they can't take our youth and innocence away. It's about standing for what you believe in, and being that positive light in the world, even in a place of drear dread and darkness.

"Pain, but I won't let it turn into hate"

The ending was all too emotional (I must have cried at least five times; I just lost track at one point). The transition from the Fix You cover (originally by Coldplay) to his final track In My Blood was heaven to my ears. In My Blood is another song about fighting and staying strong in the moments where you feel weak, and you could tell the crowd really resonated with the music and the lyrics. From the smoke, confetti, to the unbelievable guitar solos and the crowd singing repeatedly after Shawn, it was a whole different out-of-body experience. What a way to end a show.

Before my show, I read online that a lot of people felt as though the concert felt like a festival of love and celebration, and that's exactly what it felt like. It was a room filled with people who wanted to celebrate music, share love and positivity amongst each other. Everyone was there to have a good time, and boy, didn't we?

The “Wau” factor: a Paradox

Radia Syed | Non-Fiction

When I was 6, I promised myself that I would get married to chocolate and have sticky, gooey, chocolate babies with it. However, I have matured considerably, and my affections have turned from chocolate to the Backstreet Boys, to something else – a country (forgive me, Kit Kat and Nick Carter).

This is not an ode to my ever-changing line of crushes. But it is an ode to the land of fishballs and frog porridge, old Chinese mahjong-playing men, breathtaking islands, and above all, football-loving, warm-hearted people.

Fast forward 21 years, and it still hasn't set in that I've spent more than half of my life living and growing up in a different country from my birth country. That's a TCK (Third Culture Kid) for you, right there.

I'm proud of this. But I'm also a walking, talking paradox. Hell, my whole TCK experience is a paradox. Does that mean I have no ties to my birth-country? Am I having an identity crisis? I don't know. I was born in Karachi, Pakistan, lived there for 8 years, until I was abruptly shipped off to Malaysia upon my family's job posting, where I've been living for the past twenty years. And granted, there is no denying that street-cricket in Defence in windy weather is one of the best things ever. Halwa puri on Sunday mornings, & family drives to French Beach at night, and then for ice-creams later? Oh, the simple, child-like pleasure of it. Karachi is the hare that possesses that dangerously fast-paced and thrilling bullet-like energy about it – but Malaysia, is just the opposite – that laid back, chilled, do-as-you please, tortoise. Put in a nutshell, whenever I think about Malaysia's culture, Covergirl's advertising slogan pops into my mind – *easy, breezy, beautiful*.

But at the same time, I miss home – and yet, I want to stay here. I find myself constantly wishing that I could be in both places at once – Pakistan & Malaysia. And then I find myself questioning myself- what am I really doing here.

That's not to say that Malaysia hasn't welcomed me & my stomach with open arms. For a TCK growing up in one of the food capitals of the world where there is every cuisine you can ever think of? The amount of jaw dropping looks I receive when I proudly tell non-Malaysians about the random dishes I constantly entertain my stomach with never cease to amuse me. *You ate WHAAAT? Cow's TONGUE? And Roti Canai! Isn't that just plain roti?!*

No, its bloody well not. But it is Hands Down The Most Delicious Thing You Will Ever Eat. In Malaysia, you eat because you *live* to. And if eating were an Olympic sport, Malaysians would come first, I kid you not. If I were to choose between ending world poverty and *Roti Canai with Milo Ais*, I would dither (I am not proud of this. I'm just saying).

Going to *mamaks* late at night, discussing football tactics with full gusto after a steaming hot cup of teh tarik – that's a whole different story. That's the chilled, Malaysian culture at its best. Marveling at the cheap bazaars/malls and shopping not till you drop, but till you are *sprawled* flat out on the floor with exhaustion and sheer excitement of the variety of international brands – that's another story altogether. And parasailing over crystal-clear, sparkling blue waters in Perhentian Island and Langkawi – that's *another* story altogether.

No, I can't remember the rules of cricket anymore. Hell, I can't even throw a googly in cricket anymore.

But I DO know how to chomp my way to finishing an entire durian. And I can distinguish between Cantonese and Hokkien, two *Chinese* dialects (Admit it, you thought Chinese was *all* the same, didn't you? You ignorant noob).

I am also the Obi Wan Kenobi in battling mosquitoes, to exotic house lizards.

In other words, I am **HARDCORE**.

But most importantly, after 21 years here, I am no longer appalled by the fact that Malaysians do not, have not – and will not ever use– *cloth* napkins, like they do *everywhere* in Pakistan. Instead, they use –*gasp* – *paper tissues*.

It's funny how, despite residing here for so many years, I still get amazed every time I step into the commuter train and find myself surrounded by not just one race, but three – Indian, Malay, and Chinese. But throw in many smatterings of Europeans, Eurasians, Ibans, etc. and this is as diverse as diversity can possibly ever get; the place where East meets West, in perfect harmony. Never once have I been made to feel racially inferior, and there's at least one person – from every possible country that Wikipedia can recite – living in this tiny place of 28 million.

But maybe I've been away far too long. The irony is that, after living years in Boleh Land, nothing makes me feel more un-Pakistani than going home. Truth be told, I am a foreigner in my own country – out of touch with the zeitgeist of Pakistan, with its line of cheek-pinching aunties and never-ending corruption; I feel Malaysian, in so many ways. My roots may belong to Pakistan, but my heart's somewhere else.

So here's to Malaysia – a small country, with a big heart. I can never thank my stars enough for how lucky I've been, for giving me a home away from home.

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