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## **The Recognition of Malaysian Women: Unpacking the Defiance of Malaysian Women's struggle then and now**

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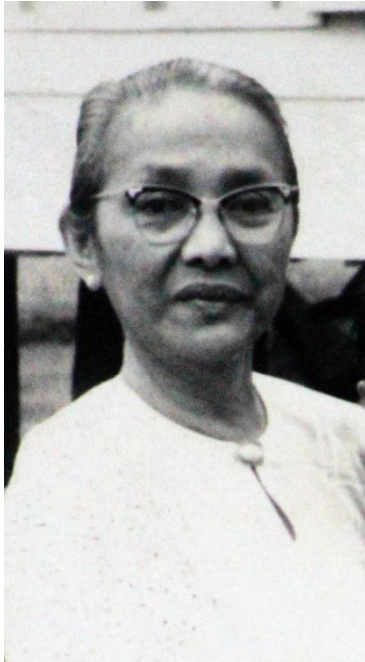
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# Herstory: The Recognition of Malaysian Women

Unpacking the Defiance of Malaysian Women's struggle then and now



*Figure 1: (left to right) Lily Eberwein, Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani*

Master's Thesis

M.A. History: Colonial and Global History

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## Table of Contents

Introduction: <i>Mana Semua Kaum Wanita di Sini?</i> (Where are all the women?)	3
Chapter 1: <i>Wanita. Di sini. Sekarang. Sentiasa.</i> (Women. Here. Now. Always)	9
Chapter 2: <i>Wanita Malaysia Radikal</i> (Radical Malaysian Women)	22
1. Lily Eberwein (1900-1980)	23
2. Shamsiah Fakeh (1924-2008)	27
3. Aishah Ghani (1923-2013)	32
Chapter 3: <i>Malaysia dalam impian</i> (Malaysia in a dream)	38
Conclusion: <i>Tanah air</i> (Homeland)	47
Bibliography	53
Appendix 1: Interviews	60

## Introduction: *Mana Semua Kaum Wanita di Sini?* (Where are all the women?)

*"I ran off into the jungle to join the armed struggle against the British colonialists to fight for the independence of Malaya. I was 24 when I left my parents, family, and village to fight for my country."*<sup>1</sup>

This is quoted directly from Shamsiah Fakeh's autobiography, one of three women to be discussed in this thesis. Their defiance in a time of turmoil will be discussed in relation to how it may provide an image of strength and resilience to contemporary Malaysian women. The term *role model* is introduced here as it perfectly captures what these women's stories can live on as. However, Shamsiah's name was unknown to the three contemporary Malaysian women I interviewed for this thesis. Women contributed heavily to the Malaya/Malaysian struggle, yet this recognition is not widely incorporated in the mainstream and or public history of Malaysia, especially to Malaysian women. All three women from the past were Malaysian as well as all three women from now who were interviewed. But what does it mean to call oneself Malaysian? Considering Malaysia was once fragmented into Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo. The three historical women were also considered "Malay", this meaning they were of Malayan origin and Muslim. The orientalist formulation by colonizers on being "Malay" has bled into present-day research and politics, instituting ideas that divide Malaysians according to: Malayness, Chinese-ness, Indian-ness, Asli-ness.<sup>2</sup> This is interesting considering how British colonial powers brought over both Chinese and Indian labourers to British Malaya in the 1900s, displaying a way in which colonial influence not only constructed boundaries but also uprooted people and manipulated the ethnic identity present in a given area.<sup>3</sup>

The terms Malaya and Malaysia will both be used here in accordance with the time frame being discussed whether pre- or post-independence of Malaysia. Furthermore, Malaysia, as many other countries who established independence from colonial powers, tend to focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Shamsiah Fakeh, Ben Fajar Hu, Chuah Siew Eng, and Strategic Information Research Development Centre. *The Memoirs of Shamsiah Fakeh: from AWAS to 10th Regiment*. (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD) 2009), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Shamsul A. Baharuddin, "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 356.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 363.

either the dominant patriarchal perspective or simply disregard the profound efforts of women based on the nation's efforts. Academic research has come a long way in relation to themes, topics, and peoples they provide attention to but how has this been translated to the people themselves? The academic realm, although immensely significant, is a privileged space. Especially in relation to the exposure, access, and comprehension of its materials. This is something that was made blatantly clear to me in the last couple of years under western higher education. It may be helpful to declare now where the interest for this thesis lies on Malaysian women and their stories reaching mainstream audiences. I am a mixed-raced Eurasian woman, from both Malaysia and Denmark. I only own a Danish passport as Malaysia does not allow dual citizenship. This, amongst many other factors, has led me to the lack of a sense of belonging despite growing up most of my life in Southeast Asia. What I know of current affairs in Malaysia and the turmoil concerning identity and gender, has led me to try and provide a space where women's voices are raised but also have them aid in the understanding of the diversity of being Malaysian.

Western colonialism and its deliberate construction of boundaries in Southeast Asia has also directed the later independent region's political and social atmosphere, thus having a long-lasting effect on identity.<sup>4</sup> The colonial narrative is not here to take centre stage but be understood as a major player in the idea of categorization of peoples in a region. Then, by focusing on marginalized groups, this thesis hopes to provide a positive change to existing narratives by showcasing inclusivity whilst advocating for this research to reach a wider audience of those who may have not felt represented by their country's history. This thesis will attempt to answer the question of what could the socio-political narrative of three radical Malaysian women from a pre- and post-independent era then provide contemporary Malaysian women of today? "Radical women" in this context alludes to women who fought for change or a replacement of systems and societies that were present in their time whether through change within the system or against the system.

This research question comes with sub-questions listed below:

1. How can the story of these three Malaysian women from the past act as role models for Malaysian women today?

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<sup>4</sup> Amitav Acharya and Ananda Rajah, "Introduction: Reconceptualizing Southeast Asia." *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 27, no. 1 (1999): 3.

2. What can these three Malaysian women contribute to the discussion on identity formation in Malaysia?
3. To what extent is academic research already considering revisionism of Malaysian history?

This thesis is split into three chapters, the first displaying the interviews held with three contemporary Malaysian women and hearing their truth on what exactly they know of Malaysian heroines, if any. The second chapter will then be focusing on three Malaysian women from the past and their stories of defiance during the Malayan struggle. Lastly, modern, and contemporary academic literature be explored. In relation to how they discuss matters pertaining to revisionism of Malaysian history and where women fit within that. Through this structure, I attempt to provide a redirection by indicating the problems at hand, proposing individuals as role models and discussing the academic work surrounding this topic already.

This thesis is relevant to society regarding the on-going discussion on women and their inclusion in historical research. As Ruth Lewis and Susan Marine pronounce in their paper, a more compassionate approach is necessary. That is in understanding the context in which contemporary women are facing reproduced issues of women before them.<sup>5</sup> Through the contemporary interviews it will be understood that Malaysian women unfortunately are still victims to similar hindrances. Moreover, it can also prove beneficial to the academic community and the public through an encouragement of a stronger relationship. What is intriguing of Ruth and Susan's work especially, is their attention to both, the academic and mainstream realms, with observations and research stemming from a place of both realms.<sup>6</sup> This thesis, although also written in academic confinements, can act as a potential catalyst and reminder of the necessity for the academic world to reach out rather than just within. Furthermore, in commenting on this gap and need, it is in no way proclaiming the academic world as negative. Rather witnessing the abundance of research already out there on **her**story rather than just **h**istory and pondering the possibilities it can provide for women outside of academic and privileged spaces.

To return to the three women from the past who will be introduced, their stories can not only potentially act as reflections of resilience but also provide guidance to contemporary

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Lewis and Susan Marine. "Weaving a Tapestry, Compassionately: Toward an Understanding of Young Women's Feminisms." *Feminist Formations* 27, no. 1 (2015): 119.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 120.

Malaysian problems. In a globalised society, where identity is becoming obscured and complex, it is hard not to feel left out. The three women focused on in this thesis, who either have a handful or scarcity of literature written on them, can provide an understanding of the complexity of identity in Malaysia. In doing so, subsequently give contemporary Malaysian women a sense of self and connection. The three women are Lily Eberwein, Shamsiah Fakeh and, Aishah Ghani.

Identity is an ongoing debate in Malaysia and continues to cause controversy amongst its people. All three women mentioned above are Malay, but their origin stories indicate the diversity of what being Malaysian is. If a *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysia Nation) is ever to be achieved, there must be space made to research and discuss ways in which origins of many Malaysians are just as mixed as the next and deserve recognition and representation. I, specifically, only briefly mention religion as all three of the women I am discussing in this thesis are Muslim Malays. The scope of this thesis does not include the magnitude of the religious discussion that is prevalent in Malaysia today. However, I do want to acknowledge that the theme of religion is important but deserves its own space.

Through a micro-historical approach, focusing on three individual women in both a pre- and post-independent Malaysia, this thesis also attempts to fill in the gap of the discussion of identity in Malaysia through a female lens. The idea behind the use of a micro-historical approach, as Roxana Waterson puts it, is “By turning the focus to that space where history intersects with personal experience, it offers new insights into wider social and political processes.”<sup>7</sup> So, why discuss these women concerning Malaysian historiography? The attention provided to Malaysian women who have struggled alongside their male comrades has been lacking and this may be due to how Malaysian history is presented. The overshadowing of female radical activism by the grand narrative of independence has been assumed by scholars.<sup>8</sup> Instead, men are provided the pedestal of recognition, whereas women had simply served their purpose in the struggle without further acknowledgment on their involvement. If women were to be included, they were placed in the background, whilst men took up the foreground as being the real pioneers.

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<sup>7</sup> Roxana Waterson, *Southeast Asian Lives: Personal Narratives and Historical Experience*. (NUS Press, 2007): 2.

<sup>8</sup> Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, “Against Multiple Hegemonies: Radical Malay Women in Colonial Malaya.” *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 1 (2013): 153.

Furthermore, women are also discussed in very localised terms, as will be discussed further later. There is a heavy focus on Peninsular Malaysia and not so much regarding North Borneo and Sarawak which make up the Federation of Malaysia today. Despite all three women being Malay, this did not completely disentangle them from the struggle of non-Malays. Terminology based on ethnicity can provide such comfort and recognition. Nonetheless, it can also create exclusion and boundaries which is interestingly uncovered by these women and their experiences and interactions.

The political and imagined entity of Malaysia was worked into existence from Malaya. The Federation of Malaysia that we know today is not exactly what it was right at independence from colonialism. A prime example is Borneo that consisted of Sabah and Sarawak which were also under British colonial rule but not considered Malaya until 1963. This is where Lily Eberwein comes in as she sheds light on an experience of an East Malaysian as she was Eurasian, but her mother was from Sarawak where she spent most of her life. Then we have Shamsiah, who represents affiliation with communism and the diaspora she experienced while exiled to China. As a comparison there is Aishah, who unlike the other two women worked within the system that was present and raised herself in the ranks whilst still considering the rise of women as well. All in all, there is a lot to be discussed regarding Malaya in its struggle under colonialism and how Malaysia is continuing to simultaneously recover and grow. How these women maneuvered through the environment which encompassed them, is extremely insightful.

Now, in the years since a colonised Malaya, the country has progressed in many ways, but through the contemporary interviews it will be made known what these women know of women in the past as well as issues that both women in a pre- and post-independent Malaysia continue to face. Women have actively contributed to the growth of the country since before independence and continue to do so. The struggles faced by contemporary Malaysian women are often ignored despite the history of successful female activism whether it be explicitly or implicitly.

Activism in an explicit fashion is often feared. Looking at these three women and the way they implicitly defied gender roles and broke boundaries on a personal and regional level could provide a role model for Malaysian women today. The achievements and tribulations of Shamsiah, Lily and Aishah can inspire Malaysian women to feel connected to their national



identity and empowered. Empowered through realising their ability to overcome perceived boundaries. Especially considering Malaysia's independence from colonialism was only achieved fifty-eight years ago. What these women provide that is not necessarily found elsewhere, is their complexity of identity and political involvement. All three are connected by their political agendas but in different spheres. The radical nature of these women truly expresses the extent of their refusal to adhere to the patriarchal and colonial environments that encompassed them. There is something extremely encouraging of that strength to myself and potentially many other Malaysian women today. This thesis hopes to evoke and stimulate discussion on academic research and what reaches the public through conversing with contemporary Malaysian women today and unearthing where the gap lies. Furthermore, bringing to the surface the struggle and defiance of Malaysian women and where they stand firmly in Malaysian history. Through the inclusion of Malaysian woman historical figures, Malaysian women today can interact with a past that they can be proud of and see similarities with their own struggles and triumphs. Traditional destinies were not always upheld pre-independence and do not have to be continued now. Conveying how these three women could break away from the chain of imposed gender roles and rise out of them is noteworthy enough. So, how has Malaysia's history been conveyed to the people? We begin with the first chapter on contemporary interviews held to learn what can be understood of Malaysian women and Malaysia in history by Malaysian women today.

## Chapter 1: *Wanita. Di sini. Sekarang. Sentiasa.* (Women. Here. Now. Always)

To begin this thesis, we start with the now. Those women who have not been exposed to the various academic literature focusing on women. Those women who face similar limitations as women in the past but in different conditions. As author and researcher Agnes Khoo does in her work, “Life as the river flows: women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” (2004), she secures a space for heroines to not be shadowed by time. Khoo was able to conduct oral interviews with women alive during the colonial era and provide a personal narrative. This thesis is taking a somewhat similar route, where oral interviews are held and discussed but with the voices of contemporary Malaysian women and their reflections of Malaysian history and its inclusion of women. Connecting of the past with the present is paramount in being able to educate oneself of where your roots lie. The invisible bonding constructed through the understanding of struggles and triumphs of those before us and what we understand of our own struggles and triumphs now can be extremely enlightening. The concept of a **role model** is important here. Without a more pronounced examination and projection of women and their strength, how can a woman be encouraged to build further depth through evidence in understanding her own capabilities. By introducing contemporary women to women of the past and their stories, they can be reminded of their ability to persevere against what continues to hold them back and empower them.

Now, the choice to hold oral interviews was based on oral traditions being integral in South-East Asian history.<sup>9</sup> Through oral interviews, I am providing the inclusion of a South-East Asian framework within a Eurocentric one. I hope the interviews can provide a qualitative analysis of what can be remembered of women figures in Malaysian history, if any. Additionally, what women today have to say on the matter. There has been focus placed on an oral history project in relation to nation-building but when it comes to themes such as gender, and women specifically, oral interviews are not usually a requirement.<sup>10</sup> So, by bringing in oral traditions but with a clear focus on women, this chapter of this thesis wishes to point towards the inclusion of women today, their struggles and triumphs in the discussion. Furthermore,

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<sup>9</sup> Patricia Pui Huen Lim, Chong Guan Kwa, James H. Morrison, “Oral History in Southeast Asia: Theory and Method”. *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies* (1998)

<sup>10</sup> Mahani Musa, “Reconstructing the Past through Oral History: A Malaysian Experience”. *Kemanusiaan the Asian Journal of Humanities* 25, no. Supplement 1 (2018): 50.

interviews and oral testimonies are extremely beneficial to social history rather than archival sources and documentations.<sup>11</sup> This is because we hear directly from the people. Histories on women are scarce in the form of written documentation.<sup>12</sup> Oral histories could provide the avenue to express their side. Now, the necessity to bring women and oral histories together can be understood by how Malaysian women are at fault of generalization by scholars through a singular area then going on to represent the majority.<sup>13</sup> This is something that I was aware of during the process of deciding who to interview. It was clear I would be interviewing contemporary Malaysian women but where in Malaysia? From the following interviews, it is also made clear that there is a heavy focus on peninsular Malaysia and extremely lacking on the East side of Malaysia. Lily Eberwein was chosen despite the lack of sources on her, so through the interviews I also wanted to choose women who could represent the East.

The three women that have been chosen to be interviewed are all Malaysian nationality and grew up either most of their life or part of their life in Malaysia. However, they are from three different generations. The first interviewee is a twenty-three-year-old woman who identifies with the state of Selangor, the second is a thirty-two-year-old woman who is both Danish and Malaysian but identifies with the state of Sabah, and the third is a fifty-eight-year-old woman who identifies with the state of Sabah. Why I chose women from different age groups was in hopes of potentially seeing a progression or development in the education of history, particularly history that centres on women figures. Furthermore, the concept of formulating role models is not just for young girls or women, but for all women without the distinction of age. An overview of the questions used in the interview can be found in the Appendix 1: Interviews. The questions were a starting point for each interview but there was always space left to allow the conversation to flow in any direction. The questions guided the interview and acted as a reminder to cover necessary bases.

Malaysia's independence (that including North Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore) having been held in 1963, was only fifty-eight years ago. Yet as will be made visible through the interviews, education on Malaysian history, especially about women, is highly scarce. Furthermore, the act of conducting oral history is a way in which Southeast Asian cultures have captured moments in history that have not been recorded elsewhere. Due to multiple factors

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<sup>11</sup> Cheah Boon Keng. *New Perspectives and Research on Malaysian History*. (New ed., Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2007), 147.

<sup>12</sup> Mahani Musa, "Reconstructing the Past through Oral History: A Malaysian Experience". *Kemanusiaan the Asian Journal of Humanities* 25, no. Supplement 1 (2018): 42.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

such as the destruction of documents due to the Pacific war, documents written by colonial authorities, or documents written by the elite focused on regions within Malaysia, it has left most people fragmented from the possibility to produce their histories. Although oral interviews are majorly focused on individuals and their stories, these individuals are valid in their experiences as they represent a community, and their stories are not without interaction with others.

People should be given space to have their views on their home represented. The idea of “history from below” is of central focus here, the voices of ordinary people and their lives deemed valuable and representing of their time.<sup>14</sup> Oral history also has a focus on the recent past. We cannot speak to those who have already passed and so there is a relative time boundary to oral history. This time boundary can prove useful in understanding a time relatively close to our own so a higher level of understanding can be obtained. However, as will be stated in the second chapter, the information we have on Lily Eberwein, is through interviews made with her daughter. This is also valuable and speaks to the imprint left on others by individuals. Oral stories provide a way of documentation that comes directly from the people for the people.<sup>15</sup> Time has also been against the region of Southeast Asia and its fast-paced urban development. However, this is potentially where the interaction with the digital world could allow this relationship with the past to persist.

To return to the lack of sources, this can firstly be explained by the previously mentioned mass destruction of archives during World War II, also known as the Pacific War in Asia.<sup>16</sup> The Akib Negara Malaysia (National Archives in Malaysia), in its early development, endorsed the idea of ‘total archives’. This means the preservation of complete records over those that were missing parts. One particular Ph.D. dissertation looked into exactly this in the 90s. They found through direct investigation, that the Akib Negara Malaysia needed to improve and upgrade their system to be easier to use as well as to be aware of the gaps in documentation and what that could mean for research and nation-building.<sup>17</sup> This kind of hands-on and in-person research was preferred for this thesis but with the current pandemic, such travels for

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<sup>14</sup> Mahani Musa, "Reconstructing the Past through Oral History: A Malaysian Experience". *Kemanusiaan the Asian Journal of Humanities* 25, no. Supplement 1 (2018): 42.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Samsiah Bte Muhamad, "Archives and Research in Malaysia. The development and Challenge Ahead 1990-1995." (Dissertation, University College London, 1996)

research were unavailable. It is necessary to mention how important research gathered and done in the place of study is, as it can provide a more saturated and primary sourced thesis. However, through the digital age and social media, this thesis was still able to exist and interact with both academic history and mainstream history.

It must be declared that the three women interviewed do hold a close relation to me. The first woman is a secondary school classmate from Damansara, Selangor, the second woman is a blood-related cousin from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, and the third woman is a blood-related aunt from Keningau, Sabah. My pre-existing relationship with these women curated an intimate space for them to share their views. I conducted these interviews in an informal manner over the phone. This was to provide a space for these women to share their responses and insights freely with as little hesitation as possible on saying the “right” thing. However, I maintained distance for the sake of this thesis through first stating my motivations behind writing this thesis.

The first woman interviewed is Yasmin Harizal. She currently resides in Peninsular Malaysia and works for the Women’s Aid Organisation.<sup>18</sup> When asked what she knew of female figures in Malaysian historiography and whose name pops up for her, she was taken aback by the question. She asked if she could mention someone from today instead because no name came to mind. I allowed her to remark on any female figure that came to mind, and she mentioned Hannah Yeoh and Nurul Izzah binti Anwar, both of whom are politicians. When asked why she chose these women, she goes on to explain that “They focus on humanity and want to change Malaysia, they don’t focus on a specific department but rather takes care of the people under their district, ground-level work”.<sup>19</sup> Through this, we can understand the importance to this individual of the kind of aid and change that is admirable to her, which is when people work from the bottom up rather than the other way around. It was then asked where exactly Yasmin had heard of such female figures and she stated, “A lot from social media, we don’t really get to learn about these people from school, no one gets to hear these things unless through social media”.<sup>20</sup> This is interesting to note as Lily, Shamsiah and Aishah were not exposed to such levels of technological advances, as this rise in the use of social media

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<sup>18</sup> “WAO,” Women’s Aid Organisation: <https://wao.org.my/>

<sup>19</sup> Yasmin Harizal interviewed by Nina Ashley Bach, see appendix 1 – interview no.3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

only came much later. There is no telling how that may have influenced them and those around them as they relied on different means. Nonetheless, they were able to reach many and spread what they believed in without it. However, an academic article although may dive into these topics is only shared and read by a select few. Whereas social media could be a great tool for the fast-paced spreading and discussion-based approach to these themes.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, there is current research looking into social media and specifically online identity reconstruction. Huang, Kumar, and Hu (2020) published a study called, “Does Culture Matter? A Comparative Study on the Motivations for Online Identity Reconstruction Between China and Malaysia”. This study alone investigates online identity reconstruction, producing a comparative study and further bringing up the question of the importance of culture.<sup>22</sup> Completely disfiguring what was once understood as different layers of identity. It can be seen here the extent to which the internet can play major roles in our understanding of self and each other.

So, how can we harness the power of social media in bringing the academic and public together? Rachel Leow also touches upon this in her work, “Reflections on Feminism, Blogging, and the Historical Profession”, particularly that of blogging. As the academic world tends to stay within its own realms or as Jennifer Ho puts it, ‘ivory towers of academia’, blogging is a public activity, and can obtain direct interaction with its audience.<sup>23</sup> Rachel further uses Jennifer as an example to discuss the limitations of academic jargon towards non-academic spaces, which then perhaps oral interviews can be a solution to.<sup>24</sup> Through the direct interaction with a person, although there may still be misunderstandings, those on the outside can hear of topics from the person itself and not how it is then been academically polished. We also see here, Rachel, a Malaysian woman and academic who is clearly putting in the work of investigating issues pertaining to women but also the diversity of Malaysia itself.

Furthermore, we can see the Malaysian context specifically in her work, “Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia”. In this work she investigates the creation of a monolingual state in a multilingual society, bringing in themes of nationalism and ethnicity.

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<sup>21</sup> Terence Jackson. “Balancing academic elitism and unmediated knowledge in cross-cultural management studies.” *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*. (2016): 256.

<sup>22</sup> Jiao Huang, Sameer Kumar, and Chuan Hu. “Does Culture Matter? A Comparative Study on the Motivations for Online Identity Reconstruction Between China and Malaysia”. *SAGE Open* 10, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>23</sup> Rachel Leow. “Reflections on Feminism, Blogging, and the Historical Profession.” *Journal of Women's History* 22, no. 4 (2010): 236.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

So much so, her work has been considered valuable to other regions with a similar history.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, she argues the exclusivity of politics in a postcolonial nation-state through the notion of language. This provides a fresh take on the postcolonial atmosphere of Malaysia that many within the country could benefit from.

I proceeded to ask Yasmin what she felt may be missing in Malaysian historiography, she exclaimed, “We lack a lot in our educational system regarding the changes that women are making, but we progress so slowly with women, only right now are things changing but by women who need the change”.<sup>26</sup> She went on to say, “our syllabus is from centuries ago, its **history** not **herstory**”.<sup>27</sup> This comment was an eye-opener to the extent to which women are excluded in educational teaching and what authoritative figures are trying to formulate of Malaysian history. This need for change is not new and still prevalent in discussions of Malaysia’s education system. Wing Thye Woo argues the urgent need to pay attention to education reform but not through the politically motivated direction it currently is headed in. The government enforcement of subjects that focus on Malay dominance is discouraging towards other fields of knowledge.<sup>28</sup> Looking at the education of history specifically, there is also recent research like “Values in History education in ASEAN countries” by Nordahlia Zainal, Mohd Mahzan Awang, Abdul Razaq Ahmad, Anuar Ahmad & Asmahani Muhthar. This paper points towards the tedious and boring education of history many students have said they endured. Furthermore, commenting on the fact that students need to be given the chance to share their views other than just being told what has happened.<sup>29</sup> This I believe is crucial in also providing a multicultural approach to Malaysian history. Hearing multiple perspectives instead of the Malay dominant narrative that is often projected.

Yasmin’s comment of necessary change for women being majorly done by women rather than with the help of men is also important to note. Women and their struggles are often pushed aside in the grand narrative of national independence. Their stories and voices minimized as it is to be blurred within the fight for all. All three women from the past to be discussed in the next chapter found space to fight for their people but also directly for women. The struggles faced by women are usually neglected as a gender issue and for women to then work on, not

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<sup>25</sup> Sumit K Mandal. “Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde 174 no. 4” (2018): 505.

<sup>26</sup> Yasmin Harizal interviewed by Nina Ashley Bach, see appendix 1 – interview no.3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Wing Thye Woo, “Decentralising Malaysia’s education system”. *EastAsiaForum*, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Nordahlia Zainal, Mohd Mahzan Awang, Abdul Razaq Ahmad, Anuar Ahmad & Asmahani Muhthar, “Values in History education in ASEAN countries”, *Redwhite press*, 2019. 88 & 89.

collectively by women and men. In Malaysian educational teaching of the national narrative, there has been the marginalization of the contribution by other groups and the favouring of a particular ethnic, political and religious group.<sup>30</sup> But again the focus is on ethnicity which is valid but virtually no mention of gender bias. Furthermore, to remark Rachel's work, "Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia", language plays a key part in this articulation of national history. History textbooks are to serve as the link between Malaysians in the past and Malaysians today but have to a degree, failed to do so.<sup>31</sup> Oral interviews however can provide that direct and instant connection and discussion.

Now, due to the inclusion of Shamsiah, I went on to ask what she had heard about communism and her interpretation of it. Yasmin went on to respond, "I can only remember the old communists of Malaysia and how the Malaysian soldiers tried to fight them off. Other than that, I can only think of Russia or South Korea as examples."<sup>32</sup> I found it important to ask this as a way of seeing how contemporary persons interpreted communism in general. It is often the case that it has a negative connotation. Rather than sympathizing with how communist communities often provided a safe space for a lot of women in a time of turmoil. We see this exclaimed in Agnes Khoo's book, as mentioned previously, she interviewed women still alive who survived the pre and post independent era. Yet many are still exiled and cannot enter Malaysia. These women believing, they were fighting for their nation also found safety in these communities as they were given an education, shelter and treated as equals. Women and girls suffer disproportionately during and after times of conflict and are the most vulnerable. So, mainstream history should encompass the fact that although many may disagree with how countries have decided to interpret communism, they should not deny its significance to these women. In the next chapter, when discussing Shamsiah Fakeh, this significance will be mentioned.

Moreover, I then asked if I could then share the three women, I was focusing this thesis on and ask for her opinion. After, she said she had never heard of any of them and that they were very interesting figures especially in the context of how diverse their identities were. Yasmin then went on to remember a lecturer she had in university that remarked the fact of how women needed help and that communists were helping them and asked the class to what extent were

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<sup>30</sup> Kumaran Rajandran. "Us and Them: The Portrayal of Malaysians and British in Malaysian History Textbooks." *Journal of Asian and African Studies (Leiden)* 48, no. 3 (2013): 313.

<sup>31</sup> Rachel Leow. "Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia". Cambridge University Press. (2016)

<sup>32</sup> Yasmin Harizal interviewed by Nina Ashley Bach, see appendix 1 – interview no.3.



they bad and how does one determine that. She then gave an example of the Sisters in Islam, a Malaysian civil society organisation, and how some aspects of the organisation were not perfect but they had done a lot of work in aiding in the change of the Syariah law and its bias toward women.

Ultimately, history is not what first meets the eye, it is incredibly layered as something done to aid one community can completely disrupt another. The response by Yasmin made me think of Lily Eberwein regarding her activeness in the Anti-cession movement of Sarawak. She fought to keep the White Rajah Brooke in power instead of the British Empire, but this could be misconstrued as aiding the colonizer. Instead of the idea that she could have been doing what she thought was best for her community. Yasmin went on to also comment on how these women accomplished such things in their time despite the expectations that were placed on women then and now to be domesticated. She remarked that her grandma could go to school till she was nineteen but then had to get married. Then, I asked what it was like to be a woman in Malaysia today and what she hoped for the future of Malaysia and women. She went on to respond, “It’s difficult, people perceive you as weak, and there’s still this narrative to get married and not have to go to university. It’s unfortunate, we have so much to aspire to do”. Furthermore, she comments, “Women also don’t know their rights or what their capable of, education is so important”.<sup>33</sup> Yasmin ended the discussion by stating she was excited for this thesis and what it could provide to the current generation of Malaysian women.

The next two women I interviewed were Jennifer Bradfield from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, and Helen Pedersen from Keningau, Sabah. I interviewed these women at the same time as they are mother and daughter and I thought the three-way conversation could lead to a more back and forth open discussion. Jennifer grew up most of her life in Malaysia and Singapore and now resides in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Whereas Helen has lived most of her life in Malaysia and Singapore and now resides in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. I asked what they knew of female figures in Malaysian historiography, and again, they could not think of any women from history to mention. Jennifer did however mention Tengku Chanela Jamidah, a Malaysian princess of the Pahang royal family who is a wellness guru as well as a cannabis campaigner. She admired her advocating for justice and as Yasmin exclaimed, the focus on humanity and

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<sup>33</sup> Yasmin Harizal interviewed by Nina Ashley Bach, see appendix 1 – interview no.3.

people.<sup>34</sup> Helen remarked the Queen of Johor (Her Majesty Raja Zarith Sofiah). She admired how during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the economy not doing so well, she helped struggling students in the United Kingdom by giving them allowance aid.<sup>35</sup> There is a slight trend of these three women favouring that of on the ground and direct aid offered by these women. Women who did not wait for someone higher up to fix the problem but took it upon themselves and what they could do. Although they could not mention any historical female figures by name, they did remark that information on historical figures, in general, were usually either through institutions or the local newspaper. We can see here a difference in generations and forms of media that were current to them.

When asked if they felt anything was missing from Malaysian historiography, Jennifer exclaimed, “The perspective of North Borneo, we are underrepresented, and it is clear by the fact that peninsular Malaysia celebrates Merdeka Day (Independence Day) as when they obtained independence but not when North Borneo joined the Federation of Malaysia”.<sup>36</sup> Helen responded in agreement with Jennifer, further implying the importance of the inclusion of a figure such as Lily Eberwein, who is from Sarawak, in this thesis. Lily represents the East side of Malaysia and provides a wider scope of every state under the federation.

I then proceeded to ask the question of what they knew of communism and specifically in Malaysia. Jennifer responded, “The first thing that comes to mind is China, I don’t think of it negatively, the Western world has exaggerated ideas about it, but I am pretty neutral about it.”<sup>37</sup> Helen however said, “It doesn’t work, I have no comment”.<sup>38</sup> Here we can again see a clear divide in generation and the stance taken upon the discussion of communism. It is not that Helen’s response was negative per se but that she simply did not build any notion towards it. Could this then be remnants of growing up in a just post-independent nation? Through the documentary by Rachel Leow, we learn how families who were separated due to being communists, did not wish to speak up out of fear. In Leow’s film, “Chinese Go Home”. she interviews the children of Malaysians who faced discrimination at the height of the Sino-Malay tensions and how they were perceived and affected. Many people who were not even part of the communist party were deported on the basis that they were Chinese or were rumoured to

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<sup>34</sup> Jennifer Bradfield interviewed by Nina Ashley Bach, see appendix 1 – interview no.1&2.

<sup>35</sup> Helen Pedersen interviewed by Nina Ashley Bach, see appendix 1 – interview no.1&2.

<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Bradfield interviewed by Nina Ashley Bach, see appendix 1 – interview no.1&2.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Helen Pedersen interviewed by Nina Ashley Bach, see appendix 1 – interview no.1&2.

have relations to the party. Thus, shedding light on the reactions of Malaya to that of communists.

I then proceeded to share with them the stories of Lily, Shamsiah and Aishah and got their comments. Jennifer believed these women needed to be put in the spotlight, but it is hard because everything in Malaysia is run by Malay men. Helen commented that the few women she has seen in authoritative positions are tokenised for being a woman and often are puppets in the grand scheme of the patriarchy. This is where Aishah Ghani can be brought into the discussion regarding to what extent could she have been a puppet in the grand scheme of the patriarchy? Aishah worked under UMNO, the party that entered and remains the government of an independent Malaysia. She still managed to bring up and fight for women's issues to the capacity that she could. It is easy to condemn her to this narrative instead of displaying how she simply worked another angle to raise herself in an environment that expected her to fail. The two women I interviewed both exclaimed the fact that men fear what women are capable of if given power. I quote Jennifer, "*Kalau kami bagi peluang satu Wanita nanti kami habis*".<sup>39</sup> This translated to English says, "If we give one woman a chance, we will be finished." This is regarding how men react to women rising in power. The conversation then went on to the topic of what it is like to be a woman in Malaysia today and what they hoped for in the future of women in Malaysia. Jennifer responded, "Malaysian women are struggling, women are not prioritized [...] In politics especially they don't care about Bornean's or *Orang Asli* (indigenous peoples)".<sup>40</sup> Helen responded, "Men think they know better than us because they are men, but when women start being louder than they tend to back up. They can't handle that woman can do the same thing as them, they can't handle an independent woman".<sup>41</sup> I believe this can be reflected in the three women in this thesis. Is their independence and strength threatening to men? Could this point towards the lack of their inclusion in the grand narrative of Malaysia as well as their entry into the mainstream?

Now, what I had hoped through these interviews was to provide some context as to the reason why I deemed this thesis topic and research valuable. Through the perspectives of these contemporary Malaysian women, we see in the present-day a gap between academic history and mainstream history. It is easy then to believe there is no work being put into women-oriented research. But, as the third chapter will display, although limited, there has been an

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<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Bradfield interviewed by Nina Ashley Bach, see appendix 1 – interview no.1&2.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Helen Pedersen interviewed by Nina Ashley Bach, see appendix 1 – interview no.1&2.

increase in attention to women but not in every aspect of history. Through these interviews alone, can be a point in the right direction of indicating where exactly revisionism is necessary. Although only these three women's accounts were taken into consideration, through their accounts alone, we see a trend of this lack of inclusion of as Yasmin put it, *herstory*. When sharing the stories of the three radical Malaysian women it was clear through the interviews how impressed the interviewees were.

We can take author Agnes Khoo as an example of this gap in historical knowledge despite her generation being much closer to the year of independence as is Interviewee, Helen. She describes herself in her book "Life as the river flows: women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle", as belonging to the apolitical generation of the 1980s, many of those born then knowing so little of their country's history.<sup>42</sup> Even checking herself in her work, asking how she could be writing about an era in which she knew so little about. However, most interestingly, she remarks on the dull projection of Malaysian history in education and that through the biographies and stories of the women she interviewed, life was given to the narratives.<sup>43</sup> The focus on oral history can indirectly help society and get people to think about where they are and where they are headed.<sup>44</sup> Speaking to the people and hearing their side rather than treating them as statistics, creates a more humanistic approach to individuals' lives.

Moreover, relaying the fact that these women and the movement they fought for were marginalised in the discussion of national history.<sup>45</sup> However, the marginalisation reaches further than just those who joined the communist party but were simply women. I think there is so much more that can be done to present to Malaysian women today of their ancestors. Here is where the term **role model** finds its footing. Having been aware of these women from the past as an actor with agency can remind contemporary women of their same agency.

The research that is being made in academic spheres and the research that reaches the public differs greatly. Anyone in academia can remark of sources and research that display great innovation of thought. However, to what extent can the public do so? It is not as if academics are barred from entering the public realm, the means to do so are there but the ability

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<sup>42</sup> Agnes Khoo, *Life as the River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-colonial Struggle (An Oral History of Women from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore)*. (Merlin Press. 2007): 1.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Mahani Musa, 'Reconstructing the Past through Oral History: A Malaysian Experience'. *Kemanusiaan the Asian Journal of Humanities* 25, no. Supplement 1 (2018): 44.

<sup>45</sup> Agnes Khoo, *Life as the River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-colonial Struggle (An Oral History of Women from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore)*. (Merlin Press. 2007): 2.

for scholars to be influential is lacking. However, we can see ways in which scholars have stepped outside of this exclusivity. For example, Rachel Leows's film, "Chinese Go Home". Rachel takes the opportunity to not only comment on pressing issues but does so through a visual medium that can then better be seen by the public through the social media platform, YouTube. Through personal experience in academic spaces of historical research, the centrality of reaching out to the public and entering mainstream discussions is not as prevalent as I would have imagined. Although as the title *history* indicates, history does focus on the past. But where is the fierce initiative to take the chance to share these sources to those who are reaping what others sowed. Oftentimes we do not have the stamp of actuality because an event or persons is far from our own time, and we cannot directly ask them. So, why not take what we have gathered and bring it to those who may benefit from them now?

For a long time, academic knowledge was not challenged due to the assumption that it was produced by and for those highly educated and connected to esteemed institutions. Today this can still be found, however, there is higher incentive than ever to challenge such assumptions. To ask how such knowledge is created, distributed, and applied to real world situations. A trend found in academia is academic elitism, this is the circular notion of distribution of knowledge. Narrowing who can produce such knowledge and who has access to it. This is where technology comes in, specifically social media as a means to provide representation of marginalized and diverse knowledge.<sup>46</sup> Challenging elitist views of the world and providing a space digitally to share such information can prove beneficial to those who may feel unheard. Especially regarding women, as in many places in the world, women speaking up is heavily frowned upon, the digital space can provide a sense of security and anonymity. It is not only about reaching out and publishing academic research to the public. It is also about finding a way in which the public will get excited about this information. Again, I promote the concept of oral interviews. A space is created where the public is included and can be spoken to and listened too. Through the interviews I held I was able to gain an idea of what exactly these three women knew of the historical field in relation to women as well as inform them of the academic research I gathered. So, in a way, researcher and participant are simultaneously learning and teaching. The inclusion of someone outside academia also allows the public to feel more comfortability in entering knowledge producing spaces. The next

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<sup>46</sup> Terence Jackson. "Balancing academic elitism and unmediated knowledge in cross-cultural management studies." *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*. (2016): 256.

chapter takes a look back, at the stories of three radical Malaysian women: Lily, Shamsiah and Aishah,

## Chapter 2: *Wanita Malaysia Radikal* (Radical Malaysian Women)

The following chapter will dive into the social, political, and religious identity and selves of three Malaysian women, Lily Eberwein (1900-1980), Shamsiah Fakeh (1924-2008), and Aishah Ghani (1923-2013). All three women represent radical women with political, religious, and social/personal identities. All three of these women were Malay-Muslims however identifying them solely as Malay Muslims is reductive to their multifaceted selves. All three women lived through an extremely uncertain and transitional period of a colonized Malaya and independent Malaysia. There is consistent rise found in relation to publishing on women political leaders. This can be seen as an attempt to create a central pedestal for women to be on regarding the national political movement. This can be seen through the papers such as: “Women in Politics: Reflections from Malaysia” by Wan Azizah Wan Ismail<sup>47</sup> from 2002 then “Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements” edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn<sup>48</sup> from 2013 and “Gender, the Status of Women, and Family Structure in Malaysia” by Charles Hirschman from 2016.<sup>49</sup> But the focus on facts that affect primarily women such as social class, being married or not, being a virgin or not, age, divorce or widowed is not as central. These women not only fought in different capacities for their country/community, but they did so in the constraints of their time. The idea of freedom for these women is not the same as it is for women today. But similar factors still hinder women’s growth then and now as we have heard from the interviews with Yasmin, Jennifer and Helen.

Nonetheless, this emergence of a new sense of individuality was curtailed by a multitude of factors; the British not acknowledging the call for independence, the Japanese occupation as well as internal conflicts against political beliefs.<sup>50</sup> These three women are remarkable in what they achieved in their time. This does not however dismiss the many other women whose stories were never recorded and will never be heard. Now, we will dive into the three women from the past individually before then bringing them together.

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<sup>47</sup> Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. “Women in Politics: Reflections from Malaysia”. International IDEA. (2002).

<sup>48</sup> Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting, eds. *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*. NUS Press, 2013

<sup>49</sup> Charles Hirschman. “Gender, the Status of Women, and Family Structure in Malaysia”. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies*. (2016).

<sup>50</sup> Agnes Khoo, *Life as the River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-colonial Struggle (An Oral History of Women from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore)*. (Merlin Press, 2007): 11.

## 1. Lily Eberwein (1900-1980)

The first of the three focused women is Lily Eberwein. It must be noted that the only focused source on her is by Welyne J. Jehom, from her article in the book, “Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements”. In email correspondence with Welyne, she relayed that she could not share her notes. They were made to be confidential by Lily’s daughter who shared the personal details of her mother to Welyne in an oral interview. This sheds some light on the difficulties in obtaining such personal information. Sources on people from the past can sometimes only be survived by those related to them. However, we cannot fully disregard such sources as they can prove valuable to someone in a way it may not to another. Lily’s daughter could inspire or encourage other family members of courageous women to share their stories. Those stories then have the potential to make an imprint on other Bornean women such as interviewee Jennifer Pedersen and I. The lack of sources on Lily, can point towards the fact that sources are scarce on peoples from East Malaysia, let alone women. This was a motivation to include Lily as she represented mixed-raced origins and East Malaysia. Furthermore, Lily did not firmly stand with any political party throughout her life, even amidst the independence of Malaysia. She did the work that she found vital for her immediate community rather than the wider agenda of Malaya becoming Malaysia.

Lily Eberwein was born to a Eurasian father and Malay mother. She grew up in a Christian household in Singapore whilst her mother practiced Islam. Her religious identity was moulded by the fact that when her father passed, she moved back to Sarawak and lived in a Muslim Malay upbringing.<sup>51</sup> Eventually she converted to Islam but did so only after she had educated herself on the religion. Locals ended up sending their children to be taught the Quran by her. Which was quite the gesture considering women were not usually consulted for religious teaching.<sup>52</sup>

Concerning personal life, she married later in life to a man younger than herself. What may sound controversial for its time, was not a problem for her considering she was highly respected for her dedication and motivation to her community and did not conform to the

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<sup>51</sup> Welyne J. Jehom, “Lily Eberwein: Her Life and Involvement in the Anti-Cession Movement in Sarawak.” *In Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (NUS Press, 2013), 185.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



confinements of the domestic domain.<sup>53</sup> These two facts of her social identity can prove beneficial to Malaysian women today who may feel pressured by religious duties. As well as the expectation to marry someone quickly and much older than themselves. Moreover, Lily's dedication can be seen through her becoming the first female principal of the Permaisuri Malay Girls School.<sup>54</sup> From her involvement in her community and witnessing the responses to the education of girls and women, she became passionate about the education of Malay girls. Education is something that seemed to have been of importance for her. Interviewee, Yasmin, points out a similar response as stated in the previous chapter, women often don't know their own rights and that education is very important in the journey of self-awareness. We can see something shared between these two women, living in such different times but still attributing similar ideals. In the book, "Women in Malaysia Breaking Boundaries", Malaysian authors Roziah Omar and Azizah Hamzah point out and argue the role women played in Malaysia's social development through being providers and consumers of education.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, in the Malaysian constitution under Article 12(1), there is a law of non-discrimination against any citizens based on religion, race, descent or place of birth, but nothing in relation to gender.<sup>56</sup> The absence of gender is proclaimed by the authorities as a non-issue as it should be assumed that women are equal in educational rights. But that also leaves room for women to be overlooked.

Regarding her political identity, Lily is notable for her efforts in the anti-cession movement in Sarawak in the 1940. Considering very little attention was given to women's involvement in the movement.<sup>57</sup> This movement was an interesting phenomenon as it was against the takeover by British imperial power. But was in support of keeping the rule of the "White Rajahs" of Sarawak. The locals did not want to fall under the British empire, as the Japanese occupation had left them unwilling to be subject to imperial rule again. Furthermore, under the White Rajah's, the Sarawak Malay Elite were brought in as advisors and benefitted

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<sup>53</sup> Welyne J. Jehom, "Lily Eberwein: Her Life and Involvement in the Anti-Cession Movement in Sarawak." *In Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (NUS Press, 2013), 185.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 186.

<sup>55</sup> Roziah Omar and Azizah Hamzah. *Women in Malaysia Breaking Boundaries*. (Utusan publications and distributors SDN BHD, 2003), 212.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>57</sup> Welyne J. Jehom, "Lily Eberwein: Her Life and Involvement in the Anti-Cession Movement in Sarawak." *In Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (NUS Press, 2013), 175.

from privileges provided to them by the Brooke family. In turn, the elite being consulted by the Rajah brought about respect from the Malay community.<sup>58</sup> It can be hypothesized that the involvement of Malays as advisors provided a sense of control by the locals. Instead of simply a land where people were colonized by either the Japanese or British. Moving back to Lily, she displayed a radical stance through resigning as headmistress in solidarity with the movement, indicating a true act of political commitment.<sup>59</sup>

What is interesting to note here is that she recognized herself as Malay but always fought beside that of other indigenous races and went on to start a multi-ethnic school.<sup>60</sup> She did not visibly display a strong bias on the ethnic hierarchy imposed, as she was mixed-raced and lived in a very multi-ethnic society in Sarawak (North Borneo has many *orang asli* (indigenous people). This is important to note as indigenous inhabitants were at a particular disadvantage due to living in the depths of the forests and many being illiterate.<sup>61</sup> This means that they did not receive much information or understanding of, for example, what the cession could mean for them. Lily even organized campaigns in the longhouses (Traditional home for indigenous groups in Bornean Malaysia) to try attracting the attention of the Ibans (an indigenous group in Sarawak).<sup>62</sup> So, to have people like Lily, who had shown her privilege and capacity to include them in her efforts, went a long way for those in her community and social sphere. Again, we see what interviewee Jennifer Pedersen mentions about needing more attention placed on indigenous communities. Perhaps seeing how a woman in a colonial atmosphere managed to engage with the indigenous community exclaimed by academic history can provide an example of initiative.

Furthermore, despite the movement's lack of success and quick upheaval, it provided space and motivation for the locals to find a place in politics. This including that of both men and women, as Lily was active as both a political leader and educationalist.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, as

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<sup>58</sup> Keat Gin Ooi, *Borneo in the Cold War, 1950-1990* (Routledge, 2019).

<sup>59</sup> Welyne J. Jehom, "Lily Eberwein: Her Life and Involvement in the Anti-Cession Movement in Sarawak." *In Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (NUS Press, 2013), 188.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>61</sup> Keat Gin Ooi, *Borneo in the Cold War, 1950-1990* (Routledge, 2019).

<sup>62</sup> Syed Husin Ali, *A People's History of Malaysia: With Emphasis on the Development of Nationalism*. (SIRD, 1 jan. 2018). 112-113.

<sup>63</sup> Welyne J. Jehom, "Lily Eberwein: Her Life and Involvement in the Anti-Cession Movement in Sarawak." *In Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (NUS Press, 2013), 175.

ruthless as the Japanese were, it provided opportunities for the locals as they represented the possibility of non-European supremacy.<sup>64</sup> This fact provides evidence on how things that may seem out of reach can become conceivable through example. Moreover, the Japanese occupation also gave women in Sarawak the ability to form associations as they were encouraged to do so by the Japanese. This however did not mean they got to choose what to do. Lily was appointed representative for the Malay section of *Kaum Ibu* (Women's group) to organise events, collect material to sell for funds and encourage tapioca growth (substituted for rice).<sup>65</sup> It did mean that these women through their involvement were provided an experience that encouraged political activity. Lily showed this through her activeness in the anti-cession movement later.<sup>66</sup> Not having joined any political party she was appointed a position in the Kuching Municipal Council. Breaking the boundaries of what a woman of her time could achieve. Her daughter even exclaimed her mother to have been her role model and taught her to speak her mind, something not only her daughter must have thought.<sup>67</sup> This points towards an image of strength that was relayed onto women through Lily's story alone. The term **role model** is brought up again here, signifying the importance of having women role models for women to look up to. Simply to remind them it is possible to reach these heights. Finally, domestic expectations are discouraging young girls into pursuing higher levels of education. But, through Lily's story one can remark on her ability to educate herself on her own terms and build self-awareness. Which then allowed for her to start familial obligations without immediacy.

The next two women that will be discussed had opposite reactions and responses to the political turmoil of Malaya. Lily was added as a missing piece to the discussion of Malaysia as a whole. Nevertheless, her story can also indicate the potential of becoming a role model for contemporary Malaysian women today if recognized further.

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<sup>64</sup> Welyne J. Jehom, "Lily Eberwein: Her Life and Involvement in the Anti-Cession Movement in Sarawak." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (NUS Press, 2013), 181.

<sup>65</sup> Patricia Pui Huen Lim and Diana Wong, "War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore". *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, (2000): 133.

<sup>66</sup> Welyne J. Jehom, "Lily Eberwein: Her Life and Involvement in the Anti-Cession Movement in Sarawak." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (NUS Press, 2013), 184.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 192.

## 2. Shamsiah Fakeh (1924-2008)

Shamsiah Fakeh is not a name you would hear when discussing heroines of Malaysian history and is not regarded as being a freedom fighter for Malaya's independence.<sup>68</sup> She was judged by the people of Malaysia and seen as an enemy of the state based on the fact she was working under the communists.<sup>69</sup> But her story still deserves a spotlight for the incredible strength she displayed and can be deemed a role model for women in Malaysia today.

Shamsiah was born in a matrilineal Minangkabau culture, went to a Malay primary school and then went onto an Arabic-medium Islamic School. The Islamic school was in West Sumatra, which is part of present-day Indonesia. This is not necessarily odd as her father was of Sumatran origin. She did not grow up with money and often struggled. Having gone to school in Indonesia, she recalls her experience as being ingrained with a sense of nationalism. However, Indonesia was under political turmoil and her father ended up bringing her back to British Malaya.<sup>70</sup> Not long after returning, Shamsiah was married off and her education stopped. Early marriage was a common fate for many young girls at that time. Her social identity at that time was simply domestic, wife, mother. I also encountered this in the interview with Yasmin Harizal when she remarks of how this narrative continues to hover over women. The potential of women becoming housewives led families to not want a formal education for their daughters. Usually only letting them have a religious education as it made them desirable.<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, Shamsiah's husband ended up divorcing her whilst she was pregnant with no explanation. It should be mentioned that both children she had with him died very young due to malnutrition.<sup>72</sup> It was also common then that if anything is to go wrong with giving birth or the child itself, the burden is on the mother, a fate that persists to this day. Shamsiah's second marriage also ended in divorce, but he ended up being a spy for the Japanese army and unfaithful to her. This all resulted in a clear understanding to her, of oppression on

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<sup>68</sup> Abd. Shafie Rahman, "Shamsiah Fakeh, Srikandi Melayu yang Dilupakan". *Yamani Angle SDN. BHD.* 2013, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 158.

<sup>71</sup> Roziah Omar and Azizah Hamzah. *Women in Malaysia Breaking Boundaries.* (Utusan publications and distributors SDN BHD, 2003), 24.

<sup>72</sup> Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 159.

women.<sup>73</sup> Despite doing what was expected of her, the marriage ultimately ended and replaced her chances at an education.

Regarding her interaction with others, Shamsiah took on what we can consider an inclusive perspective when it came to the diversity of ethnicities that the Malayan population embodied. Her political engagement led her to encounter many ethnicities and build some capacity of understanding for the racial difference. She speaks fondly of the All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA), a group formed against the agreement forged between UMNO, Malay rulers, and British colonial power in 1947. AMCJA aimed at providing an inclusive multi-ethnic collaboration against colonialism.<sup>74</sup> However, this group was controversial for its time and ultimately rejected. It provides a look at one of the many ways that there were efforts made towards inclusivity of the multi-ethnic inhabitants that made up Malaya. Ultimately this is not the direction Malaysia took. This information however could indicate to the present-day Malaysians what has been attempted and can be attempted considering the ethnic divisions still felt today in society.

Moving towards her political identity, her first entry into politics was through the left-wing Malay Nationalist Party (MNP) (First Malay political party after World War II). Within the MNP was a women's wing called Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS) which she became the head of until it was outlawed by the British.<sup>75</sup> She joined after becoming captivated by the anti-colonial efforts of the MNP after the war. She started to build a deeper understanding of her oppression and demanded for the independence of what she considered her home.<sup>76</sup> She followed seminars and public forums and eventually found herself the leader of AWAS. Later, she joined the Malayan Communist Party led anti-British armed insurrection. Running away into the jungle during the Malayan Emergency of 1948, as it was either that or being detained by colonial powers. A brief description for context, the Malayan Emergency was from 1948-1960 where the British worked with the government of Malaya to crack down on the insurgence

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<sup>73</sup> Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 159.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>75</sup> Shamsiah Fakeh, Ben Fajar Hu, Chuah Siew Eng, and Strategic Information Research Development Centre. *The Memoirs of Shamsiah Fakeh: from AWAS to 10th Regiment* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD), 2009). 2.

<sup>76</sup> Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 159.

of communists in the region. They did this by detaching them from outside contact, leaving them to flee to the jungles, as well as propaganda campaigns to challenge any notions of those who considered joining the communist's agenda.<sup>77</sup> This, as one can imagine, led to these race divisions mentioned earlier, divisions that have evolved and can be felt to this day in how the Chinese or Chinese passing Malaysians are treated. Her flee into the jungle led her to the all-Malay 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Malayan National Liberation Army that was formed within the jungle.<sup>78</sup>

Now, although it has a bad representation today, it has been previously mentioned how communist communities provided education and safety to a lot of women. This was indicated by both interviewee Yasmin Harizal and Author Agnes Khoo. We can see another perspective on communism through Shamsiah. Shamsiah was sent by the MCP to China to further her studies where she then ended up a broadcaster in a Beijing Radio.<sup>79</sup> Later, she was then sent to Indonesia by the MCP to represent them internationally but was detained by the military in Indonesia. Shamsiah was then called to Indonesia as a representative for the MCP which ultimately left her released but only back to Beijing and not Malaya. However, in 1968 she was suspended from the party as there were conflicts involved influenced by the Cultural Revolution in China. Placed under house arrest she was eventually allowed to reside in China as a "foreign sojourner".<sup>80</sup> Now the term "foreign sojourners" exclaims Shamsiah as a temporary resident. An example of the way in which the academic world is still exploring and investigating this topic through a different lens is Taomo Zhou. Taomo is a professor at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and has done a large amount of research on specifically the migration of peoples in political exile to China in her book, "Migration in the time of Revolution: China, Indonesia and the Cold War".<sup>81</sup> She focuses more so on Indonesia, but it can be reflected upon the context of Southeast Asia as there are similarities to Malaysia. Which indicate a further inkling towards the cross-cultural examination of colonized Southeast Asian states. Taomo is another example of a women in academia that in the present-day dives

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<sup>77</sup> Robert W. Komer, "The Malayan Emergency in Retrospect: Organization of a Successful Counterinsurgency Effort." *Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation*, (1972).

<sup>78</sup> Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time." *In Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 151.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Taomo Zhou. *Migration in the time of Revolution: China, Indonesia and the Cold War*. Cornell University Press, 2019.

into topics concerning women and the Southeast Asian region. Working at the university in Singapore must influence her attention to particular histories and unable to ignore such colonial remnants in today's society.

Despite her allegiance to the Malaysian identity, her application to return to Malaysia took ten years.<sup>82</sup> How hard it must have been to be rejected from somewhere you called home. In Indonesia, the mass killings of “communists” are disregarded as being less of a damaging imprint than what it was. We can see this in Malaya during the Malayan Emergency in a different setting. With the aid of colonial powers, the communist narrative was portrayed as heavily negative and led to major discrimination. Discrimination towards people supporting the communist party but also based on whether someone was Chinese or Chinese-looking. Propaganda techniques used in Indonesia to lessen the intensity of events to the public was instilled in Malaya too, but through dehumanizing communists. We see this through the previously mentioned film by Rachel Leow in how people were targeted and portrayed by colonial officers. Those exiled were remarked to have left to China with open arms and not with a heavy heart which was the case for many.<sup>83</sup> Having fought under the communist movement, eradicates Shamsiah further from national history based on anti-communist campaigns that was spewed by the successive government.<sup>84</sup> In one feature article, *Dewan Masyarakat* (Community Council), the author praises Shamsiah but then confuses her embracement of communism as a direct rejection of Islam.<sup>85</sup> Her religion does not determine every aspect of her identity. She can be both a Muslim and communist without the two having to cancel each other out. Shamsiah fought for the rights of women and the independence of her *Tanah air* (Homeland), and that's what she wanted to be remembered as.<sup>86</sup>

MCP, in its time, was the only organised and strong force that was fighting against imperialism by both the British and the Japanese. Yet, a large part, due to the Malayan

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<sup>82</sup> Helen Ting, “Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time.” In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 151.

<sup>83</sup> Rachel Leow, “Chinese Go Home: A Film by Rachel Leow.” Youtube video, 19:09. March 8, 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nw6sRY7gRI&ab\\_channel=RachelLeow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nw6sRY7gRI&ab_channel=RachelLeow).

<sup>84</sup> Agnes Khoo, *Life as the River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-colonial Struggle (An Oral History of Women from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore)*. (Merlin Press. 2007): 10.

<sup>85</sup> Helen Ting, “Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time.” In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 161.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 162.

emergency and the government formed after the independence taking on democratic values, the communists were very easily used as a scapegoat. Communists being dismissed in this way also contributes to their lack of traction in mainstream history. The primary objective of independence was advertised as fighting for rights of all, everything outside of this, such as women's rights, is pushed aside. However, in this singular stream of attention, once independence is achieved and a system is transforming, women issues are put on the backburner. As mentioned previously, joining communist groups often meant safety and education and women would flee to the jungles and join communist forces as it was the only way to escape rape and persecution.<sup>87</sup> This is not information to be dismissed as it proclaims the imbalance of treatment of women in times of turmoil. Furthermore, ex-guerrillas consisted of more Southeast Asian women than one would think, from Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.<sup>88</sup> Shamsiah can somewhat relate to those women who Agnes Khoo interviewed for her book. Many of the interviewees live in exile to this day in Southern Thailand or Hong Kong.<sup>89</sup> Shamsiah having been exiled for many years in China luckily did finally get permission to enter Malaysia again.

Regarding gender, Shamsiah has personally felt the oppressive nature of being a woman in her time. She used her religious knowledge to encourage women to reach outside their domestic domain as well as the idea of equality. Here, her religious identity is represented again, by not working against her but for her. To expand the minds of other women through a common factor. Furthermore, she also underwent having to give birth in the jungle and send her new-born with comrades to be adopted to find out later that they had killed the child.<sup>90</sup> This all relays both the mental and physical stress of being a woman in this situation.

Shamsiah, having written an autobiography and even being open about her association with the MCP shows an incredible amount of strength in character. To even bring up the fact that you had a family member who had been deported based on being a communist was shameful. Despite history books not portraying this, it was also something that people did not wish to speak up about. She persevered and spoke her truth as well as fought to be able to re-

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<sup>87</sup> Agnes Khoo, *Life as the River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-colonial Struggle (An Oral History of Women from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore)*. (Merlin Press. 2007): 12.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>90</sup> Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 170.



enter the land to which she believed she had fought for and given most of her life. This I believe determines real character of a positive and empowering role model.

Finally, we have Aishah Ghani, a woman with a similar upbringing to Shamsiah, but a completely different life trajectory. Adding to the fact that women cannot always be simply generalized altogether.

### 3. Aishah Ghani (1923-2013)

Despite Aishah and Shamsiah's many similarities in their upbringing, they encompassed very different journeys in their adulthood. Aishah is an interesting comparative study as she worked with the newly established government after independence and their agenda. Whereas Shamsiah had a conflicting perspective to those who came into power after independence. Then we have Lily who did not interfere with nationwide affairs, rather local affairs. It was important to include three women of different life trajectories to further indicate the spectrum of paths women could take.

Aishah's entry into the political sphere was also initiated through the left-wing Malay Nationalist Party (MNP). Both Aishah and Shamsiah were head of AWAS, however, Aishah was the first head before introducing Shamsiah to be head, as they knew of each other from school.<sup>91</sup> She went on to join UMNO and after independence, she became the leader of its women's wing.<sup>92</sup> The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was the leading political party that formed the initial government of the Federation of Malaysia that continues to stay in power today. They were also the party that had negotiations with the British for independence. In the official history books, the independence achieved in Malaysia emphasizes the peaceful means of the negotiations with the British. So much so, displaying gratitude to colonial powers for how independence was given to Malaysia without loss of life.<sup>93</sup> This is quite a statement considering the British had been colonizers of Malayan land since 1786.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> E-man, "Tan Sri Aishah Ghani." *Cipta Publishing*, Kuala Lumpur, 2007, 20.

<sup>92</sup> Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 147.

<sup>93</sup> Kumaran Rajandran. "Us and Them: The Portrayal of Malaysians and British in Malaysian History Textbooks." *Journal of Asian and African Studies (Leiden)* 48, no. 3 (2013): 327.

<sup>94</sup> Abd. Shafie Rahman, "Shamsiah Fakeh, Srikandi Melayu yang Dilupakan". *Yamani Angle SDN. BHD.* 2013, 7.

UMNO promoted a quite heavily Malay-dominated perspective and agenda which has bled into their political position to the present-day. Here, her political identity can be seen regarding what political route she took and how it evolved. Under the new government, she was appointed the position of general welfare minister in 1974. She held onto this position until she retired in 1984. Moreover, Islam guided what she fought for, and in her time, she brought forward discussions regarding Syariah legal reform. Especially in terms of reducing the possibility of polygamy for Muslim men. These men did not respond well to this, and it was overturned by conservative religious scholars.<sup>95</sup>

Now, to introduce Aishah, she was born in peninsular Malaysia to a matrilineal Minangkabau culture and went to Islamic schooling in west Sumatra. As an eleven-year-old she was offered a place as a trainee teacher. But her parents rejected it on her behalf as it would mean she would be away from their home. It was also intended that she was to be married off at a young age. This led her to take an abnormal stance of a hunger strike to continue her studies.<sup>96</sup> Her response to marriage highlights the reality of what marriage meant, which was the end of everything else that she could achieve. She was, however, able to continue her studies with the aid of her Indonesian brother-in-law. He believed in the importance of girls being educated.<sup>97</sup> Here we can see Aishah was only listened to when a man got involved. But this does not deny her perseverance to have garnered that support from a man.

Furthermore, a particular interaction in school influenced her a lot, which was when she encountered Miss Kontik Kamariah binti Ahmad. She was in awe of the young woman and commented on the fact she drove her own sports car, this level of independence and ability to command a space when speaking impressed young Aishah.<sup>98</sup> One could remark Miss Kontik as a role model, seeing a woman thrive made Aishah believe she could do so as well. Again, women role models can prove extremely valuable, empowering, and motivating to women. So much so, in her autobiography, "Memoir Seorang Pejuang" (Memoir of a warrior) Aishah exclaims, "kerana saya berpendapat peristiwa-peristiwa yang akan saya rakamkan dalam

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<sup>95</sup> Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 151.

<sup>96</sup> E-man, "Tan Sri Aishah Ghani." *Cipta Publishing*, Kuala Lumpur, 2007, 5.

<sup>97</sup> Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 157.

<sup>98</sup> Aishah Ghani, *Memoir Seorang Pejuang* (Diatur Huruf oleh Citra Publishing Sdn.Bhd. 1992), 4.

memoir itu mungkin berfaedah kepada generasi muda yang tidak akan mengalami peristiwa-peristiwa seperti itu dalam hidup mereka.”<sup>99</sup> (Translation: Because I think the events that I will record in this memoir may be beneficial to the younger generation who will have not experienced such events in their lives). She remarks how she believes her memoir can be beneficial to the younger generation who have not experienced such events in their lives.

Back to Aisha, her education was further interrupted when the Japanese occupied Malaya, but she was still able to work as a teacher for a while in Selangor.<sup>100</sup> Although Lily had a different experience, here we see how colonialism also dampened the opportunities for locals to obtain an education and work. After the Japanese occupation and World War II, Aishah was the lead writer of the Malaysian National Party (MNP) whilst also, as mentioned previously, the head of AWAS.<sup>101</sup> She did however remove herself from the party as she was uncomfortable with their direction and commented. That there were a lot of Chinese as well as Malays. She then became the Malay-language broadcaster for Radio British Military Administration and focused on raising her family before joining UMNO in 1950.<sup>102</sup> In 1955, she then moved to London to further her studies. The time in which she left for her studies also being a very crucial point of Malaya’s declaration of independence. Even when asked by the UMNO leader, to come back to Malaya to become the head of the women’s wing, she rejected the offer stating she must complete her journalism education in London.<sup>103</sup> Interesting to note that this was an education she was receiving from those who colonized her *tanah air* (homeland). However, those who dominated the UMNO scene were English-educated male elites. Being proficient in English was important for candidacy as UMNO leader and so she prioritised that to then rise higher in the national ranks.<sup>104</sup>

Aishah witnessed how many women wing leaders were women of status and not those who could understand the struggle. Her need to rise beyond that could have been an ode to

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<sup>99</sup> Aishah Ghani, *Memoir Seorang Pejuang* (Diatur Huruf oleh Citra Publishing Sdn.Bhd. 1992), ix.

<sup>100</sup> Helen Ting, “Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time.” In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 158.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>103</sup> E-man, “Tan Sri Aishah Ghani.” *Cipta Publishing*, Kuala Lumpur, 2007, 32.

<sup>104</sup> Helen Ting, “Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time.” In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 163.

this.<sup>105</sup> It can be confusing then why she advocated UMNO's struggle as one fighting for the Malay people's future. Without addressing the multi-ethnic origin of peoples in the nation. Even when regarding Malaysia's independence, she solely conveys that of the Malay people's effort and not all those who fought alongside the Malay's.<sup>106</sup> This disregard of other ethnicities can also be associated with living through the previously mentioned Sino-Malay attacks. Although it has been exclaimed to include the voices of the multi racial society, the dominant Malay political leaders still view Malaysian history at its core as Malay history.<sup>107</sup> It also did not help that the 1969 racial riots in Malaysia occurred during this crucial moment in historical debate. It is as if every time Malaysia was going one step forward, they also took a step backwards. She had formulated a very Malay nationalistic political perspective which was prominent in her generation. Despite this conflicting opinion, she can still be admired for her perseverance in a time that saw women as worthy of a very singular image, domesticated. Within her autobiography, in the last chapter called *Malaysia dalam impian* (Malaysia in a dream), she dedicates a passage to imagining the future experiences of women in Malaysia. Exclaiming that any form of discrimination against women will disappear by itself by 2020. How women will be able to hold any position just as men.<sup>108</sup> This is interesting to note as she wrote this in 1992. However, through the interviews in the first chapter, such hopes have still not been achieved despite its expected fruition.

Now, the stories of these three women display what Malaysian women were and can be, which is multifaceted and having agency. Aishah Ghani represents that of women who worked with the system to achieve their own degrees of success. Despite her perspective on inclusivity of ethnicity, she still aided in the Malaysian struggle. The first instinct as someone from the present-day was a sense of disappointment with her inability of inclusivity. However, Aishah being from another background, generation, and time, one cannot fully understand the act of survival those alive then underwent. To wear our present-day goggles is to also take a bird's eye view of an event in history without being amid it. All three women still fought for something which was freedom from colonial powers and in various degrees, the rise of girls

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<sup>105</sup> Helen Ting, "Shamsiah Fakeh and Aishah Ghani in Malaya: Nationalists in Their Own Right, Feminists Ahead of Their Time." In *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, (NUS Press, 2013), 167.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>107</sup> Blackburn, Kevin and Zonglun Wu. *Decolonizing the History Curriculum in Malaysia and Singapore*. (Routledge, 2019): 113.

<sup>108</sup> Aishah Ghani, *Memoir Seorang Pejuang* (Diatur Huruf oleh Citra Publishing Sdn.Bhd. 1992), 225.

and women. Aishah through her reform of Islamic laws that attempted to revise the power of men over women regarding polygamy. Lily through her relentless focus on providing education to girls and maintaining this stance throughout her life. Her unique entry into Islam pointing towards her eagerness for girls to be educated and thus able to make their own decisions as she did. Shamsiah used Islam to empower women to a multitude of selves that they could become besides domesticated. Furthermore, Shamsiah opted for a more radical approach, confronting colonialism through the communist agenda that allowed her to fight side by side her male comrades. Despite obstacles and barriers placed on these women by men, they learned to navigate the patriarchal environment of their time and persevere. It has been previously mentioned that religion will not be the main discussion point of this thesis as it deserves its own space to be understood. But it should be mentioned that as these three women were Islamic, they faced a different experience to that of women who were not Muslim. This is in relation to what was expected of them based on interpretations of Islam by the society at that time. Political participation provided women of their time to receive not only an education but awareness of self as well as those around them.<sup>109</sup> Thus, leading to empowerment in a time where it was not necessarily the path laid out for them. Despite all three women identifying as Malay, these women represent the diversity in origin of Malaysian's and disclaim a singular identity of what it is to be a Malaysian, particularly a Malaysian woman.

These women, as mentioned several times, display very positive role model behaviour and narrative. I think it can best be understood by Agnes Khoo, "the personal and political liberation experienced by these sixteen women feeds into and strengthens our ongoing struggle, as women, for our own emancipation."<sup>110</sup> The biographical approach taken with these three women can reflect a narrative often left out of both the grand narrative of Malaysian history and mainstream history. By taking an almost micro-historical approach, one can identify and raise the voices of those who aided in the struggle of emancipation from colonial powers. No matter which angle they were fighting from. There should not be a hierarchy in choosing who gets to be included in historical discussions. Every story plays a part whether small or big.

The next chapter will dive into the academic world and look into ways women have been brought into the discussion but also have been displaced. Although not as complete as

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<sup>109</sup> Agnes Khoo, *Life as the River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-colonial Struggle (An Oral History of Women from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore)*. (Merlin Press. 2007): 30.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 31.

one would hope, research has been done on women's involvement and their role and this deserves more attention.

### Chapter 3: *Malaysia dalam impian* (Malaysia in a dream)

In this final chapter, some academic historical context will be provided in relation to the themes that have been discussed in the previous two chapters such as Malaysian women, education, identity, and colonialism. This is to provide further context in addition to alluding how research has manifested itself regarding Malaysian history.

Now, the Federation of Malaysia was born in 1963 when the federation of Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia) joined Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore. Territories under British colonial rule eradicated so much of what could be understood of a precolonial Malaysia and partly built the foundation of Malaysian modern history.<sup>111</sup> The Malaysian population adopted this modernised perspective laid out by the British without much attention for local traditional outlooks. The geography of “Malaya” was also interesting especially through the western idea of what boundaries were, forming divisions using seas and rivers. Borders set up based on natural features rather than ethnicity.<sup>112</sup> This implementation of boundaries by foreign powers evoked a sense of nationalism for Malaysians and their territory.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, Southeast Asia saw major political and economic change during the years 1870-1914, influenced from an industrialisation period in the West that used the region to fulfil its market needs. This led to Southeast Asian states being forced to open their resources to Western powers as well as ultimately become colonies.<sup>114</sup> Through a diversity of labourers recruited, it was easy for them to not only be manipulated by colonizers but also unable to smoothly assimilate themselves in their new “home”. Despite the British colonial authorities also being foreigners, they remarked the Indian and Chinese labourers as sojourners.<sup>115</sup>

The British saw themselves not necessarily as foreigners but as governing the Malay states on behalf of Malay rulers.<sup>116</sup> We see the term sojourners used previously when discussing Shamsiah, as she was seen as a sojourner within China. So, it is inevitable that values once

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<sup>111</sup> Kevin Blackburn and Zonglun Wu. *Decolonizing the History Curriculum in Malaysia and Singapore*. (Routledge, 2019): 1.

<sup>112</sup> Cheah Boon Keng. *New Perspectives and Research on Malaysian History*. (New ed., Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2007), 235.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>114</sup> Amarjit Kaur, "Indian Labour, Labour Standards, and Workers' Health in Burma and Malaya, 1900-1940" *Modern Asian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2006): 426.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 427.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 428.

seen as “Asian”, have been revisited and discussed in the East’s interaction with capitalist systems that were placed during the colonial era.<sup>117</sup> Traditional assumptions of the past and how it relates to the present are undergoing and have through time become more prevalent and necessary to reconsider. A colonial influence to be considered is the introduction of the Malay Reservation Enactment in 1913, which solidified the definition of “Malay” and so forth the idea of “Malayness”.<sup>118</sup> Despite this, the focus on the “Malay race” tended to come from a cultural perspective rather than political. Here we can bring up Benedict Anderson’s argument in his book “Imagined Communities”, in which he states that to properly understand nationality, nationalism or nation-ness we must keep a few factors. These factors being, how they have come into historical existence, how their meanings have changed over time and why they hold such deep emotional legitimacy.<sup>119</sup> What it means to be Malaysian is consistently evolving. But the foundation of which is linked to colonial influence. A post-colonial atmosphere demands a separation from said colonizers and birth of identity. What is unfortunate about Malaysia is that despite ultimately all fighting the same evil, there are still struggles on the meaning of being Malaysian that is felt in society rather than literature.

Now, the decolonisation process in the years since independence has been in conflict between eurocentrism and asiacentrism within history. In Malaysia, the decolonisation process was very central in discussion. As is expected when trying to formulate one’s own history apart from that of colonialism and colonizers. The need to move towards modernity has reshaped Malaysia in many ways but has left behind the attention to freedom, individualism and the inclusivity that comes with that.<sup>120</sup> Now, the British took away the local’s ability to define themselves due to categorization and classifications. Right after independence, governments tend to essentialize ethnic identity. This is because it can aid in solidifying national identity which will then in turn display and confirm international legitimacy. But in Malaysia’s attempt to hurry along the decolonisation process, they unfortunately left behind many ethnic groups as well as specifically women and their contributions outside of simply fighting for

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<sup>117</sup> Amitav Acharya and Ananda Rajah, “Introduction: Reconceptualizing Southeast Asia.” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 27, no. 1 (1999): 2.

<sup>118</sup> Shamsul A. Baharuddin, “A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of ‘Malayness’ in Malaysia Reconsidered.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 363.

<sup>119</sup> Benedict Richard O’Gorman Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991): 4.

<sup>120</sup> Maila Stevens, *(Re)Framing Womens Rights Claims in Malaysia. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.* 127.



independence. Then and now, Malaysia continues to try and define what it is to be Malaysian rather than accepting the diverse peoples that make up this nation.

In Cheah Boon Keng's work "New Perspectives and Research on Malaysian History" from 2007, he makes valid points about the approach to Malaysian history. Despite the time since then, we see it still referenced by Kevin Blackburn and Zonglun Wu in "Decolonizing the History Curriculum in Malaysia and Singapore" published only three years ago. Both of which have been included in this paper as reference. Santhiram R. Raman, in 2021 published a book, "From decolonization to ethno-nationalism" which investigates the evolution of history in Malaysian education from a pre-to post-independent era.<sup>121</sup> A review by Qaleeda Talib, Vice president of Imagined Malaysia<sup>122</sup> exclaimed disappointment to the work. In what she hoped to be a fresh take on the matter, it simply reiterated what has been said many times before by academics.<sup>123</sup> Reiterating that something needs to be changed, but how? Through the layout of the chapters, it also displayed a loss at the chance to bring the voices of women into the discussion too. Netusha Naidu, co-founder of Imagined Malaysia through the online platform FORSEA (Forces of Renewal for Southeast Asia)<sup>124</sup> posted a presentation called "Incorporate women's history for better gender-sensitive public policies and politics in Malaysia". We see here a woman opening space for women to join the conversation. Through an online platform but also from facilitating a workshop with women discussing these matters.<sup>125</sup> Again, we can see this attitude of reaching out to the community and interacting with them.

It is clear there is an understanding of where the issues lie but not necessarily the urgency to act on it. I believe the answer truly lies from talking to those from the places being spoken about. Not just the academics of the nation, but also the regular citizen. We also have the recent publication by Ananda Devan Sivalingam, "History of Malaysian Education System: Year 1824 to 2025" that again attempts to project the development of the education system but also provide recommendations. Especially considering the Covid-10 Pandemic, the way in

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<sup>121</sup> Santhiram R. Raman. Decolonizing the History Curriculum in Malaysia and Singapore. Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2021.

<sup>122</sup> Imagined Malaysia: An online platform tackling the issue of involving alternative histories of Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

<sup>123</sup> Qaleeda Talib, "Why Study history: the myth of nation-building". CIE\_Malaysia.

<sup>124</sup> FORSEA is a Southeast Asian democrats and rights campaigner committed to "making our region fair, just and democratic".

<sup>125</sup> Netusha Naidu, "Incorporate women's history for better gender-sensitive public policies and politics in Malaysia". FORSEA, 2021.

which students were taught completely changed and everything was morphed into ‘online learning’.<sup>126</sup> This of course brought along with it a lot of difficulties. However, perhaps it paved way to the necessary discussion of the internet and how to utilize it. A lot of what contemporary young Malaysians hear about such conversations is on social media as pointed out by interviewee Yasmin. There is an increase in accounts on platforms such as Instagram that are not NGO’s but simply spaces to bring up information that wouldn’t simply cross one’s feed for the sake of awareness. An example is @seasianfem<sup>127</sup> and @perempuanfeminis<sup>128</sup> (femalefeminist). These two accounts alone create a space to celebrate Asian women but also reference leading research that could be investigated further.

So, despite the decolonization of Malaysian history continuously developing in academia, could social media be grounds for a deeper connection to the contemporary Malaysian? Social media introduces a new layer, depth and reach that was not possible previously. The major argumentation against social media displaying knowledge is assessing the quality of information. Despite the significance of this, academic knowledge is also not as thorough as proclaimed. Take the *Sokal Affair* as an example.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, academic discussion is limited via journal articles. Whereas when posted on social media accounts, a space opens for discussion and critic by an assortment of individuals. Furthermore, professors and academics in general have a surplus number of tools available to them to educate the public. Primarily social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, Youtube, TikTok, Blog posting. These social media platforms can be most easily consumed through mobile phone technologies. Mobile phones are omnipresent today and their ability to communicate and share information regarding women expose a speed and result previously unheard of.<sup>130</sup>

Furthermore, a study on newspapers but through an online platform has been researched. “Portraying the History of Malaysia in Online Newspapers- A Preliminary Study” by Norena Abdul Karim Zamri investigates how participation of users in online news has played a part in reshaping public history. The internet as a platform has provided a space for mainstream history to be debated. The internet provides a space for people to be both interactive

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<sup>126</sup> Ananda Devan Sivalingam, “History of Malaysian Education System: Year 1824-2025”. Social Science Research Network, 2020.

<sup>127</sup> Instagram profile: <https://www.instagram.com/seasianfem/?hl=en>

<sup>128</sup> Instagram profile: <https://www.instagram.com/perempuanfeminis/?hl=en>

<sup>129</sup> Scholarly hoax performed by a physics professor to unveil the lack thereof thorough review of academic journals before publishing.

<sup>130</sup> Jennifer Radloff. “Digital Security as Feminist Practice.” *Feminist Africa*. (2013) 146.

and responsive. The term ‘participatory history’ is brought up here in discussing the opportunity for people to share their own historical experience and add to the plethora of what is Malaysian history.<sup>131</sup> As previously mentioned, many studies discuss the issues of misrepresentation, but the solution is not there. This is remarked in this paper as well but tries to formulate an avenue in which we can take to consider the internet in problem solving. Specifically, how the increased participation of users in online news has reshaped public history. Historical education can stimulate critical thinking, ideas, perspectives, chronology of events.<sup>132</sup> Textbooks and research done on history contain knowledge but also should reflect a sense of belonging and togetherness among Malaysians.<sup>133</sup> But how can this be so if women, half of the population, is not brought up as significant to the discussion other than ethnic divides?

The three women from the past I mention alone can testify to the vast identity formations amongst Malaysians. Bringing their stories to mainstream audiences by academics can potentially formulate new ideas on identity. Encouraging the change in narrative towards inclusivity. Merely hearing the stories of these women and the complexity of their own identity from the outside, provided a sense of understanding previously unable to be felt by myself. These three women’s place in history allowed me to, as Syed Husin Ali writes in his book, “A people’s History of Malaysia: With Emphasis on the Development of Nationalism”, to recognize oneself in history and enable a better understanding of the roots of problems we face in the present day.<sup>134</sup> The national history does not encompass the entirety of stories, nor could it ever. But research diving into the women previously mentioned in the second chapter could provide this self-reflection on identity, gender, and inclusion.

Malaysian historians have been left to debate amongst one another concerning topics of approaches, methodologies, interpretation, and more specifically important to this thesis, “alternative histories” such as women’s history.<sup>135</sup> Now, there have been efforts made by

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<sup>131</sup> Norena Abdul Karim Zamri, “Portraying the History of Malaysia in Online Newspapers- A Preliminary Study”. Elsevier Ltd, 2016.

<sup>132</sup> Hedyasha Binti Abdullah, “Implementation of Historical Thinking Skill Among Malaysian Students using History Textbook: Concept, Issues and Challenges”. Redwhitepress, 2019. 198.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 199.

<sup>134</sup> Syed Husin Ali. *A People’s History of Malaysia: With Emphasis on the Development of Nationalism*. (SIRD, 1 jan. 2018), 1.

<sup>135</sup> Cheah Boon Keng. *New Perspectives and Research on Malaysian History*. (New ed., Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2007), 1.

scholars in Malaysia, seeking to cover a wider spectrum of histories to be told to encompass the whole of Malaysia. But the discussion always seems to come back to that of eurocentrism and asiacentrism. Interestingly, the trend of decolonizing history was also very much taken up by western scholars. Although not justifying colonialism it still took a Eurocentric approach.<sup>136</sup> Many historians in Malaysia are Malaysian however still western-trained, trying to face Southeast Asian problems from a European perspective. Even with histories on Malaysian women being primarily written by foreign scholars. Some may disagree with that, which would remove myself from the equation as I am western trained in my education. But it has also been said that what it really comes down to is the approach taken to sources in Asian history.<sup>137</sup> This thesis encourages this through displaying the necessity of reaching out to the community by oral interviews. Additionally, taking research out of elitist spaces and projecting them into the mainstream. Providing space for further reflection and fresh outlooks on history. Aihwa Ong, a Malaysian anthropologist also argued the necessity for engagement with local cultural dialogue, which can be derived from speaking to Malaysian women about their experiences.<sup>138</sup> It should also be made clear that Feminism in the western world cannot be compared to that of the eastern world. Cultural factors will always need to be addressed when discussing feminism in different parts of the world.

The attempt to highlight women's history, is at a much smaller scale. There are a few factors that can point towards why women's studies have gathered little interest, one of the main factors being the incredible lack of sources. When considering Europe, the possibility to dive into social history was possible due to mass documentation and their availability. Roziah Omar and Azizah Hamzah in their book, "Women in Malaysia Breaking Boundaries", argue that colonizers did not see the benefit of women in economic development.<sup>139</sup> A further understanding of how women, despite displaying being more than capable were still undervalued in their contributions. Thus, not being deemed as significant to document at the same capacity as male dominated realms. "Women in Malaysia Breaking Boundaries", is an important part of Malaysian historiography regarding women as it lays down achievements of

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<sup>136</sup> Blackburn, Kevin and Zonglun Wu. *Decolonizing the History Curriculum in Malaysia and Singapore*. (Routledge, 2019): 3.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>138</sup> Maila Stivens, (Re)Framing Womens Rights Claims in Malaysia. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. 134.

<sup>139</sup> Roziah Omar and Azizah Hamzah. *Women in Malaysia Breaking Boundaries*. (Utusan publications and distributors SDN BHD, 2003), 70.

women as well as the exploration of those achievements. The writers even pronouncing the increase in women seeking release from familial or patriarchal constraints such as women like Shamsiah. But this text is not extremely recent in publishing. There is what Filipino historian Reynaldo Ileto has termed as “scholar-activists”.<sup>140</sup> A term Reynaldo has given to describe women in successful women’s campaigns in Malaysia. Women who dive into the relationships between feminism in their own spaces and outside of it. Through this, important work has been birthed but limited.<sup>141</sup> This unfortunately seems to be a trend when discussing women in historiography, that there is work out there, but limited. Moreover, eurocentrism vs asiacentrism can again be brought up here as even the term feminism is often not preferred by Malaysian women. This is based on the need to remove itself from western conceptions and understanding of feminist issues in different regions.<sup>142</sup>

Nonetheless, the distribution of research to contemporary Malaysian women of their ancestors may remind them of their capability. We can only hypothesize what a positive woman role model can do, like it did for Lily’s daughter by Lily and for Aishah by Miss Kontik Kamariah binti Ahmad. The case studies of Lily, Shamsiah and Aishah and their complex identity formation can shed light on the ongoing ethnic debates that hinder Malaysia’s inclusive future. The struggle for independence from colonial powers, whether the British or the Japanese, overpowered the narrative of national history, leaving limited space for women. With the country still struggling to begin its historical writing from a diverse origin, it is no wonder that the interest on women is still developing. Often, when women are discussed, it is on very gender focused writing, for example, “The Progress of Malaysian Women since Independence 1957-2000” by Dato’ Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil under the Ministry of Women and Family Development.<sup>143</sup> An incredible display of the development of Malaysian women and their contributions to the country. She dives into the education of women, their health, decision making and more. But in their ability to reach out to the mainstream and gain traction enough to become a core aspect of education in the country is lacking.

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<sup>140</sup> Maila Stivens, *(Re)Framing Womens Rights Claims in Malaysia. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore*. 128.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>143</sup> Dato’ Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil. “The Progress of Malaysian Women since Independence 1957 - 2000”. Ministry of Women and Family Development. (2003).

The subaltern female voice has often been neglected and when concerns have been raised, women were told to view themselves in accordance with the bigger picture of independence and their nation. Many women writers felt that unless connected to the story of independence, nationalism, ethno-nationalism and class, the topic of gender was deemed subordinate.<sup>144</sup> Another example can be seen through the case study by Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Malaysian politician, “Women in Politics: Reflections from Malaysia” as previously mentioned. She projects the patriarchal oppressions on women and their entry into politics as well as potential solutions. An interesting analysis of women in Malaysia but also displays how it is again gender focused work. An interview with Aihwa Ong in 2016 discussing the concept ‘global assemblage’ in which she and Stephen J. Collier came up with can provide further understanding of this. They wanted to capture the dynamism of the contemporary world, and when it came to gender politics had this to say, “to study gender politics solely through the framework of gender ‘theories’ would discount the multiplicity of interacting factors that infuse the politics and practice of gender and sexuality”.<sup>145</sup> The overwhelming lack of importance to focus on women’s rights in politics and tokenism of having a few or singular women representatives in power that is troubling.<sup>146</sup> What is interesting is the way in which progress for women is often discussed in relation to political empowerment. Like the abovementioned works in addition to the main sources of the second chapter on three focused women from the past by Helen Ting and Susan Blackburn, “Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements”. There is something about a woman in politics that really declares her strength and ability to manage. We can see that through the second chapter, freedom for Lily, Shamsiah and Aishah derived from political engagement. Even interviewee Yasmin and Jennifer remarking on politics being male dominated and its lack of female inclusion. This may be due to the complexity of political spaces being both oppressive and traditional but also encouraging of negotiations and growth.

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<sup>144</sup> Maila Stevens, *(Re)Framing Womens Rights Claims in Malaysia*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. 131.

<sup>145</sup> Nina Trige Andersen, ‘I don’t do theory, I do concept work’. Interview with Aihwa Ong. Kvinder Kon & Forkning, 2015. 13.

<sup>146</sup> Charles Hirschman, *Gender, the Status of Women, and Family Structure in Malaysia*. Malaysia Journal of Economic Studies, 2016. 44.

There have been many calls for the revisionism of Malaysian history, away from the elitist approach and focusing more on the social history of marginalized groups of people.<sup>147</sup> In 2013, there was a committee put together called “The Oral History Association of Malaysia” and their purpose was the promotion of oral history. Looking into ways in which its significance could be further brought up in filling the gaps in Malaysian history.<sup>148</sup> The biggest challenge being that of “the race against time” and the expensive nature of conducting such a project.

A sense of community and empowerment can be evoked through individuals’ stories. Providing an insight into a similar yet different path one may have taken considering their circumstances and what that meant. As articulated by Lily, Shamsiah and Aishah as all three women hold many similarities, whether it be in upbringing, experiences as a woman, or determination through hardships, all ended up on very different paths and outcomes. This is, however, precisely why raising the stories of individual actors is important rather than generalizing a whole people and culture over a singular identity and way of being. These women do have sources written on them but not nearly at the same magnitude as their male counterparts and are not nearly as well known.

The ideas of nation, nationality, and nationalism have been projected onto the modern world in such a way that it holds so much value in the social and political sphere of society, yet it is so difficult to define.<sup>149</sup> We are not currently within an environment of fighting for liberation from colonial power such as before. We have space between when it happened and now. This allows us space to evaluate and formulate histories that can lean towards inclusivity of all that encapsulate the region that has become Malaysia.

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<sup>147</sup> Cheah Boon Keng. *New Perspectives and Research on Malaysian History*. (New ed., Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2007), 147.

<sup>148</sup> Zahidi Zainol Rashid, “Oral history association of Malaysia: programmes, issues and challenges.” *Journal of Information and Knowledge Management (JIKM)*, 3 (2). (2013): 135.

<sup>149</sup> Benedict Richard O’Gorman Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991): 3.

## Conclusion: *Tanah air* (Homeland)

Now, the contemporary interviews in this thesis were birthed from the idea of wanting to connect past and present. I reached out to these three women through personal network. Compiled an informal conversation with them to begin the conversation on what exactly was known by Malaysian women today of Malaysian women of the past. This ultimately exposed the lack of discussion on women in mainstream history despite the extent of academic research in the field. Additionally, it indicated a route that may further prove beneficial to the discipline, and that is recognising the extent to which bridging the gap between academia and mainstream can benefit the public. Accessibility and diversity should be regarded with more importance as it provides a larger space to introduce and gain a spectrum of perspectives. Here is where I deemed interviews extremely valuable to reach out and consider individuals perspectives. The issues we are facing today in Malaysia are not necessarily new. They are the same issues morphed into a new environment. This can be recognized through the previous chapter where historiography over time is introduced, and the same issues are consistently being brought up. History plays such an important role in reminding us of where we were, and so where we are and hopefully where we want to go. The research being done in the academic world raises, highlights, and exposes information. Yet, how that reaches the public is blurred. Having Malaysian women role models to look up to as a Malaysian woman who continues to face similar hinderances can, as the second chapter has indicated, a positive and empowering effect.

This thesis is written to remark on the gap between academic and mainstream and to encourage a stimulation of wanting to bridge that gap by all spectrums of gender. In including and raising the voices of women in the over-arching discussion of Malaysian history, it can provide an attempt to change dominating patriarchal existing narratives in Malaysia. Generalizations of women made through limited case studies and centralized to locations leave a lot left to be understood of a more encompassing Malaysian history. Malaysians were all fighting for the same foundational element, independence from colonialism and imperialism. Yet, post-independence has still featured racial and gendered divisions. We can construct greater authenticity for the time and its peoples when we include and raise all voices, not a selected few. A factor that is greatly ignored in Malaysian history is the *people's history*, in



favour of censured *national history*.<sup>150</sup> The educational frame and system have been failing regarding its attention to all that make up the inhabitants of Malaysia and their histories. This is not the first time this has been said as the previous chapter indicated.

In the new age, where technology is consistently advancing and sources can be found readily on the internet, there should be more attention paid to how the internet can be used. The internet, and more specifically social media, can indicate a potential avenue to face the issues brought up repeatedly. Higher education such as universities where research is starting to gain traction regarding women and their contributions, should seek this outward reach to the public. Should the main objective not be to have this research benefit those it is about? From the interview with Yasmin and Jennifer, it was clear we could not yet comprehend the magnitude of social media in our lives but that it is the future. In what way exactly can be hypothesised in a multitude of directions. Most spaces that I have found regarding an inclusive and transparent approach to Malaysia's diverse history has been through social media platforms. These platforms create a space where information can be shared readily but also promoted in an interesting and attractive way to the public. Discussions are inevitable between people of different backgrounds on the internet, thus creating new bridges of information and perspectives.

Now, what approach could best connect and reach mainstream spaces? This thesis advocates for oral interviews. The increase in oral sources and raising the voices of the marginalised can bring the academic closer to the mainstream. It involves expertise but also ordinary people and their stories. Just as this thesis was written 10,097 kilometres away from Malaysia, using primarily the internet, I could still obtain information and connect with people across the world. Especially considering many do not have the opportunity to enter academic institutions yet still should be provided the chance to share their story. Oral histories let the public create a sense of familiarity as they are listening directly to someone's story. The biographical approach, as well as oral sources of the three women explored make their triumphs and resilience relatable. They also indicate a necessity to include women's stories outside of their fight for the nation and its independence. By not paying attention to the extra obstacles that women undergo and how it does not compare to that of their male counterparts, we risk a repetition of actions. As the interviewees have remarked, of the same oppression and

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<sup>150</sup> Mahani Musa, "Reconstructing the Past through Oral History: A Malaysian Experience". *Kemanusiaan the Asian Journal of Humanities* 25, no. Supplement 1 (2018): 40.

expectation of Malaysian women then and now. I can only hope that this thesis contributes to the shift into revisiting historiography and providing an inclusive Malaysian context of radical women in South-East Asia. In addition, putting effort into finding ways to do so via the internet and its connectivity. Despite specifically social media being a new space to occupy academia, the covid-19 pandemic and online learning should indicate the sign of the times. In addition to an opportunity to try a new solution, so we aren't writing about the same problems with no means to fix them 15 years from now.

What can these women tell us that others may not have been able to? They give the reader multiple perspectives in understanding socio-political identity, gender, and marginalization in accordance with Malaysian history. Additionally, each woman represents women but also women who portray different life trajectories. Those life trajectories compared on both similarities and differences side by side provide another layer to understanding the complexities of their time but also the extreme differences in lived experience. All lived under the colonial era as well as an independent era. All women displayed defiance against all odds and perseverance to not only demand more of themselves but for themselves. Lily Eberwein displayed incredible self-awareness, navigating a new identity and environment to provide a space for herself as well as other women. The mere fact that she was also from Sarawak, East Malaysia, allows her to somewhat represent the necessity to hear the voices of Bornean Malaysia more. This thesis does focus on Malay women, but this was partly due to the fact travel restrictions did not allow for me to travel back to Borneo and conduct oral interviews there. My mother is from Borneo, and I aspire to project where she is from. She is of mixed raced blood as well, her father's family arriving from India and her mother indigenous to Borneo (Kadazan Dusun). So, to have found Lily and propose her as a role model, I found to be essential in this conversation and for mixed raced individuals.

Furthermore, Shamsiah Fakeh and the polarization of the political party she supported and fought alongside creates an interesting dynamic in the complexities of identity formation and an alternative layer of marginalization. In a time where there was a greater divide of genders, communism provided women a space where they could be equal. Shamsiah must have been drawn to the projected and interpreted idea of equality that was not as recognizable elsewhere in her immediate surroundings. Furthermore, despite her having been politically exiled to a foreign land, she did not give up on the idea of coming home. She stayed determined to *Balik kampung*, which means to go back home, and home to her was Malaysia.

There is also Aishah Ghani, a woman who saw where her efforts could be provided and maneuvered her way through a patriarchal system. She rose to heights not many women did at that time. Aishah was important to include in this conversation because it is necessary to see a multitude of ways in which women rose in the systems that worked against them, however that may be.

In a contemporary setting, efforts have been placed into the discussion of women in Malaysian historiography but from what I have found, not enough. To do so, I have come across three areas that could provide substantial help in this discussion: revisionism of the archival systems in Malaysia, heavier attention on marginalized oral history and an inclusion of social media in connecting the academic with the mainstream. The archival systems have a colonial influence as well as favouritism to a particular narrative. This is not a simple task. But taking the time and effort to look at all the material already there and what is missing could be extremely beneficial. Beneficial regarding the potential feeling of recognition and representation by those left out. Then, in relation to oral histories, there should be a motivation placed towards bringing back this Southeast Asian approach but with a focus on the subaltern. This is because it is not as if oral tradition has not been discussed at length in Malaysia, but rather who they decide to place the spotlight on. This would also have to take Singapore into account. Despite having become independent from Malaysia, they share stories with what was once Malaya. Oral sources provide the chance for the supplementation of women and their stories over much of textual sources that are male, or power dominated. As women have been excluded to a large capacity from traditional accounts of events that have happened in history, oral history can be seen as a tool to directly bring in their experiences and formulate herstory. It is revealing that two of the women I have included both wrote and published autobiographies speaking for themselves. Could this be in part because they felt no one else would speak their truth? Then in attempting to interact with the 21<sup>st</sup> century, academics should look beyond their realm and seek to bridge the gap with the mainstream and especially the younger generation through social media. Have the people they study benefit from the research they are conducting.

Moreover, *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance) should be mentioned as well. This lack of inclusion of different ethnicities who are still Malaysian, being a woman, or being of a certain religious group other than Islam is dangerous. Disregarding or removing the multi-racial Malaysian historiography can lead to a negative effect on contemporary affairs. Historians, both Malaysian and non-Malaysian should continue to remark on the lack of

perspectives. However, with perhaps more attention to realistic goals and initiatives to reach inclusivity. The long-term effect of such a lack of attention to the unique and rich diversity of Malaysia will only lead to more problems that can divide the country, just as colonial power tried to do with racial policy. Lian Kwen Fee, who wrote the journal article, "Introduction: Ethnic identity in Malaysia and Singapore", exclaims Islam is not the signifier of distinguishing Malay from non-Malay identity.<sup>151</sup> However, since independence, the prominence of Islam in Malaysia has grown despite Malaysia being both multi-ethnic and multi-religious. In 2002, Malaysia also declared itself an Islamic state displaying the extent of the Islamic revival and Islamicization.<sup>152</sup> Further, as mentioned previously, despite all three female historical figures I chose to research being of Muslim Malay identity, I found it necessary to use them as case studies. This is because these women's narratives convey the complexities of identity and its construction even despite representing a certain identity. The political, religious, social/personal identities of these women were touched upon in the second chapter to point towards the complexity and multifaceted selves of these individuals. There is a constant shift in what it means to be Malaysian, deriving from either political or social change that occurs during the growth of the independent nation.<sup>153</sup>

So, the inclusion of the discussion of identity here, and its diverse origins, hopes to declare some support towards understanding and accepting of Malaysians and their origins. There is a danger of these marginalised groups being written out of the collective memory and ultimately forgotten.<sup>154</sup> As mentioned previously, often, because of the heartache directly felt by family members closely involved with such a heavy time in Malaysian history, they are unwilling to speak up. This is completely fair and understandable. But it is then left to the younger generation to speak up and remind the older generation we are a continuously evolving community. We deserve to understand where we came from to determine where we are headed. The best place to reach that younger generation is social media.

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<sup>151</sup> Lian Kwen Fee, "Introduction: Ethnic Identity in Malaysia and Singapore." *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 25, no. 2 (1997): 4.

<sup>152</sup> Jaclyn Ling-Chien Neo, "Malay Nationalism, Islamic Supremacy and the Constitutional Bargain in the Multi-Ethnic Composition of Malaysia." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 13, no. 1 (2006): 95.

<sup>153</sup> Shamsul A. Baharuddin, "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 365.

<sup>154</sup> Agnes Khoo, *Life as the River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-colonial Struggle (An Oral History of Women from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore)*. (Merlin Press. 2007): 10.

Although Lily, Shamsiah, and Aishah do have a few sources written on them, either by themselves or by others, I hope more spotlight can be shed on others. Others who may not have necessarily had the resources to write an autobiography or possibility to reach out to the right people. Perhaps oral interviews can aid in this. If these interviews have shown anything, it is that the work should not be left solely on the shoulders of women. That both women and men should aid in the matter, work side-by-side, as Shamsiah and her male comrades did in the jungle. If we look at educational institutions in Malaysia, there has been an increase in participation of women but particularly in higher education institutions such as universities. Nonetheless, the imbalance of percentages of employment in comparison to their male counterparts is still prevalent as limitations instigated by familial or societal obligations plays a part.<sup>155</sup> This points to a bigger issue of political commitment to creating more space for women in addition to the need for an increased contribution by men. As pointed out by interviewee Yasmin, “only right now are things changing but by women who need the change.” Amplifying this gap and lack thereof assistance and support, will hopefully remind every generation that we are all in this together. Just as the three women from the past all fought against colonialism, today we can also fight against exclusivity.

In conclusion, embarking on this thesis has provided me, a mixed raced Southeast Asian and European woman, extremely valuable knowledge, and gratitude for those who came before me. This thesis began as a passion project and ultimately led to the discovery of my country’s obscure history that demands to be told, especially from the voice of the marginalised. I only hope I was able to provide a Malaysian context in the wider scope. As well as the discussion of Southeast Asian women and their ability to be radical, independent, and resilient despite their time. Malaysia in a dream to me is the inclusivity of ethnicities and compassion for those who struggled in Malaya for Malaysia. I end this thesis with a great appreciation for the women that came before me and a sentence I hold dear and close to my heart, “Tanah airku”, which translates to “my homeland”. Despite all the complexities in legality of what this sentence can mean to an individual, I believe the stories such as these three women can remark on the fact that it is never definitive. It is merely what you feel to be true which I hope can be understood through encouraging this research to the wider public.

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<sup>155</sup> G25 Malaysia. “Breaking The Silence: Voices of Moderation: Islam in a Constitutional Democracy.” *Marshall Cavendish International Asia Pte Ltd*, (15 dec. 2015).

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## Appendix 1: Interviews

In Appendix A, the interviews for this research will be presented. Firstly, the general layout of the interview and methodology will be displayed. The interviews will then proceed with Interview No.1 + No.2 and Interview No.3. The first and second interview were done at the same time as the participants were related and I thought having them speak together would motivate a more discussion-based interview.

I will begin with covering important prequel discussions before the dedicated questions I made for this thesis. Beginning with introducing myself and explaining that the following interview will be in relation to my master's thesis and what themes it intends to cover. The participation guidelines are as follows:

- Participants personal information (name, age and relation to researcher) will be included in this thesis and made public.
- This conversation will be used solely for the purpose of this research.
- Participants have the right to view how this interview is then used in this thesis.
- No recording will be made besides my handwritten and typed up notes, to provide an informal and intimate space for them to open up.
- Participants have the right to declare any information as confidential during the interview, particularly politically based information.

The main questions used in the interview are as follows:

- Please state your name, age, where in Malaysia you are from and, how we are related.
- What do you know of heroines in Malaysian historiography? Whose names pop up when you think of Malaysian female role models, how are you empowered by them?
- To what extent was this known through educational institutions, or your findings of the topic or through word of mouth, media?
- Do you feel something is missing in Malaysian history?
- What have you heard about communism, what is your interpretation of it?
- Can I share with you the three women I am focusing on and get your opinion on them and how you felt?
- What is it like to be a woman in Malaysia today?
- What do you hope for the future of Malaysia and women?

It must be noted that the abovementioned questions were guidelines for the interview. This is regarding the informal and flexible nature of the interviews. It was important to create an intimate and safe space where the participants could share their opinions without feeling institutionalized.

### **Interview No.1 and Interview No.2**

The first and second interview were held with Mother Helen and daughter Jennifer by phone call. They will be distinguished in the transcript by the first letter in their names whilst I will be distinguished by the first letter of my name, N for Nina.

N: Good Afternoon! How have you been doing?

J: Great, excited to join this interview.

N: Perfect. Then we'll dive right into it. So, as you know, this interview is for the purpose of my master thesis. I am writing about Malaysian women in history and wanted to include the voices of contemporary Malaysian women as well. I will be asking you a series of questions that discuss Malaysian historiography and what it means to be a woman in Malaysia today. Particularly, what your experiences have been. Despite this being for my thesis, I wanted to call you both on the phone so that we could have an open and more relaxed atmosphere for this interview. I want to simply hear your perspectives and if there is anything you want off the record or are not comfortable speaking about you can just let me know. Think of it more as a conversation.

J: Sure, that sounds fine.

H: Okay, what do you want to ask then?

N: First, I would like you to state your name, age and where in Malaysia you are from and how we are related.

J: My name is Jennifer, I am thirty-two years old, and I am from Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, and we are cousins!

H: My name is Helen, I am fifty-eight years old, and I am from Keningau, Sabah, and you are my niece.

N: Okay, thank you. Now, this paper is heavily focused on three Malaysian women in history, what do you know of heroines in Malaysian historiography?

J: Hmm... first woman that comes to mind is Nicole David (professional squash player), I can't remember any from the past. I also think of Tengku Chanela Jamidah, a woman who didn't want to live in Malaysia anymore due to the negative attention on marijuana use, she is now in Canada I think, advocating for justice and the medical use of cannabis.

H: Queen of Johor. During the first covid wave, the economy was bad, and Malaysian students in the UK were struggling, so she helped them out with giving them allowance aid, she lends a helping hand to the youth.

N: So, there was no one from history that you could think of at all?

\*Both shake their head\*

N: To what extent were these heroines you shared with me known through educational institutions and or from your own findings through word of mouth, media, the internet?

J: These women I found through the internet

H: Same.

N: When you did learn about history and historical figures where was it through?

J: School or local newspaper.

H: School.

N: Do you feel there is something missing in Malaysian History? How was it taught to you?

J: The perspective of North Borneo, we are underrepresented, and it is clear by the fact that peninsular Malaysia celebrates Merdeka Day (Independence Day) as when they obtained independence but not when North Borneo joined the Federation of Malaysia.

H: Exactly.

N: True, I always felt that was so strange... As if we aren't the real Malaysia. To move on, what is it like to be a woman in Malaysia today?

J: The law about not allowing Malaysian women to give citizenship for their kids born overseas, yet the law is if a guy is in the same position he will be allowed. High court overturned the proposal. Malaysian women are struggling, women are not prioritised to be looked after the government run by Malay men. Unfair to be a Malaysian woman in society. In politics especially they don't care about Borneans or Orang Asli (indigenous people). Also the sexual assault towards women, as if they can do anything they want to us.

H: When I was working on my project in Kudat (reference: she is an interior designer), contractors look down on women, men think they know better than us because they are men, but when women start being louder than they tend to back up. They can't handle that woman can do the same thing as them, they can't handle an independent woman They can't handle that women can do the same thing as them. Cannot handle independent women telling them what to do.

What do you hope for the future of women in Malaysia?

J: Space, we need to be heard, our stories need to be heard.

H: Yes.

N: Can I share with you the three women I am focusing on and get your opinion on them and how you felt?

\*Both nod their head\* \*I continue to give a synopsis of the three women mentioned in the second chapter\*

J: They need to be put in the spotlight. Its hard because everything in Malaysia is run by Malay men. In the government there are two women and recently these women like to stick to themselves and I feel they are simply tokenised for being a women. Rules are so backwards today. Tradition means nothing, especially from the women you spoke about, it shows that, the strength of women. Men are scared. Kalau kami bagi peluang satu Wanita, nanti kami habis. I hope to see a change in that, smart, young and diverse women.

H: I had not heard of these women before. Didn't know what they had done for our country.

N: I was also taken aback when I found them for the first time. Of course, I hadn't grown up in Malaysia, so I thought perhaps I just hadn't been exposed to them through school but hadn't heard about them anywhere on social media either. It seems they are also not projected through



either of your time in educational systems. I have one more question, that may seem out of context, but as one of the women I shared with you was a communist. I wanted to hear what you knew about communism and what your interpretation of it was and if you were aware Malaysia had a communist party?

J: The first thing that comes to mind is China, I don't think of it negatively, the Western world has exaggerated ideas about it, but I am pretty neutral about it. I was aware there was communism in Malaysia but no further details.

H: It doesn't work, I have no comment

N: Interesting perspectives, especially considering how we are exposed to communism these days. I personally never thought much of it, but after reading about how communism in a way provided a safe space for these women in the colonial era, I realise how layered it really is. However, those were all my questions, thank you for your time and energy. I appreciated getting your insight and am grateful to share your voice through this thesis and am up to discuss any part of my research or similar topics with you both.

J: Yes, anytime, thank you for sharing these stories.

H: \*Nods approvingly\*

### **Interview No.3**

The third interview was done through phone call with Yasmin, she will be distinguished by the first letter of her name whilst I will be distinguished by the first letter of my name, N for Nina.

N: Hello there! Thank you so much for accepting to join for this interview! It was great to hear you were as excited to join as I was for you to! It's been a while

Y: Hey there! No problem, thank you for having me, I liked to hear you were focusing on Malaysian women for your thesis.

N: Well, as you know, this interview is for the purpose of my master thesis. I am writing about Malaysian women in history and wanted to include the voices of contemporary Malaysian women as well. I will be asking you a series of questions that discuss Malaysian historiography and what it means to be a woman in Malaysia today. Particularly, what your experiences have

been. Despite this being for my thesis, I wanted to call you both on the phone so that we could have an open and more relaxed atmosphere for this interview. I want to simply hear your perspectives and if there is anything you want off the record or are not comfortable speaking about you can just let me know. Think of it more as a conversation.

Y: Sounds good.

N: Okay so I shall begin with asking you to state your name, where in Malaysia you are from and how we know one another.

Y: Ofcourse, my name is Yasmin, I am twenty-three years old and I am from Kuala Lumpur. Do you want me to be more specific?

N: I don't mind, whatever your comfortable with!

Y: I am from Damansara, Peninsular Malaysia and we know each other from Secondary school in Jakarta!

N: Alright, so, just to dive right into it if that's okay with you, what do you know of heroines in Malaysian historiography? Whose names pop up when you think of Malaysian female role models, how are you empowered by them?

Y: I don't know much but it could be controversial, because the politics are crazy in Malaysia right now. I know none history wise. But the names that come to mind are Hannah Yeoh and Nurul Izzah, the fact that they focus on humanity and they know what their doing and want to change Malaysia. They focus on humanity and want to change Malaysia, they don't focus on a specific department but rather takes care of the people under their district, ground-level work. They talk about the things in parliament that have to be talked about concerning the citizens. Both women work in the political sphere. I got really inspired by them through working at the WAO (womens aid organization).

N: To what extent was this known through educational institutions and or your own findings of the topic or through word of mouth, media?

Y: A lot from social media, we don't really get to learn about these people from school, no one gets to hear these things unless through social media.

N: I do feel there is a major gap in knowledge projected on female actors in Malaysian history. Social media really seems to be the new way forward for many disciplines in our generation. Do you feel there is something missing in Malaysian History?

Y: We lack a lot in our educational system in regard to the changes that women are making, but we progress so slowly with women, only right now are things changing but by women who need the change. So unfortunate we don't have this in school, our syllabus is from centuries ago, history not her story. Nothing I can recall from school had relations to women at all. A lot of it is talking about independence. I hope that we get educated on this even in school so people are aware what's going on. But I can see a lot of younger girls fighting for rights now, a lot has been going on now. We have to keep pushing for it rather than repeating history we should bring these topics up.

N: I agree, the importance of women and the multitude of topics and themes that we encompass is barely touched upon in most places really. I also feel like I don't get to hear about these things in the mainstream realm of information. It should be promoted and not something you have to dig to find out about. Perhaps a different direction but what have you heard about communists and what is your interpretation of it?

Y: I can only remember the old communists of Malaysia and how the Malaysian soldiers tried to fight them off. Other than that, I can only think of Russia or South Korea as examples. But in Malaysia, the context is that we had a communist group and the soldiers had to fight them off. In the context of women, Japanese occupation was dangerous for women, and this is what was happening, communists were hurting women too.

N: It's interesting what opinions we have on communism based on our generation. It was always something projected to me as basically all the negative opinions the west has on China. I virtually knew nothing of communism back home, only of communism in Vietnam but was surprised to learn of the stronghold in Malaysia. To move on, can I share with you the three women I am focusing on and get your opinion on them and how you felt?

Y: Yes!

N: \*I continue to give a synopsis of the three women mentioned in the second chapter\*

Y: I have never heard of these women! I think it's very interesting figures, for me with Lily Eberwein it's interesting how diverse she is, nice that she's from Sarawak and mixed. I do

remember now my lecturer said how women needed help and the communist were actually helping them, so were they really bad? An example is Sisters of Islam, good or not? Some parts is not perfect but they have done some good, and changed the Syariah law which is biased to men, like when you get divorced the man has to allow the divorce. Its interesting how Shamsiah was under UMNO, and amazing that they were fighting for things that are difficult especially as women in those times. Women are seen as staying home and doing that can be great too but its unfortunate we don't talk about them a lot. Their disregarded cause of one part. Aishah Ghani is under the government and make changes, its great to have women who can make change, especially Malay women who can make change. We didn't have a lot of rights, they have the narrative of having to stay home. Lily had a different education being mixed raced. My grandma for example could go to school till she was 19 but then had to get married.

N: This kind of brings me to my next question, what is it like to be a women in Malaysia today?

Y: Its so difficult, even till now people just look down on you as women. Even for someone who is Muslim and fighting for women's rights, its as if their against Islam and then should quit. When we speak they say we say too much. I know there's an inequality, but I didn't expect it to come to a workplace or in school. It's difficult, people perceive you as weak, and there's still this narrative to get married and not have to go to university. It's unfortunate, we have so much to aspire to do We see some changes in ways to protect women, but these changes are time consuming, how many women have to fear for their lives now. Women also don't know their rights or what their capable of, education is so important. That's why im excited for this paper! Its nice to hear you are writing about home especially women.

N: Thank you, this is really a passion project for me. Started off with wanting to bring women from the past and their experiences to the forefront but then realised that women now should also be involved in the conversation. I am glad you wanted to join! Means a lot to me, thank you.