

By Nick Choo

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KAM Raslan grew up and lived in the United Kingdom for some 20 years before returning to Malaysia. "I think I could say I was an economic migrant," the one-time filmmaker and director says. "I was just starting out in film, and it was very hard to get in. Things [in Kuala Lumpur], on the other hand, were seemingly booming.

"I remember the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989, and I was watching that and thinking, 'Wow, these things are happening around the world, and here I am stuck in London ... I want to go elsewhere and have an adventure!'"

This wanderlust brought Kam back to the country where he had been born, and where he had lived the first four years of his life. It was meant to be a short visit, but nearly 19 years later, he remains.

Kam is now a full-time writer who is well known for his *Confessions of an Old Boy* stories published in
Off the Edge
magazine and released as a book in 2007. He runs a weekly column in
The Edge
, and is currently working on a collection of writings on Malaysian history.
The Nut Graph
interviewed Kam in Petaling Jaya on 19 Aug 2009, where he talked further about history, identity, home abroad and home ashore.

TNG: Where were you born?

Kam Raslan: I was born in Assunta Hospital in Petaling Jaya in 1966. My family and I lived in Kenny Hills in Kuala Lumpur. Then my father died, and within a year we moved to England, where my mother is from.

Can you trace your ancestry?

Our forefathers were Bugis who turned up in Perak. The father of my grandfather had six wives. We are the [descendents] of the second wife, who had many children — the first wife didn't have any.

My great grandfather was the right-hand man of the then Perak sultan. My grandfather was chief minister in Perak in the 1950s, and my father was accountant general before running Bank Bumiputra Malaysia Bhd, and an accountancy firm called Hanafiah Raslan Ong, which is now Hanafiah Raslan Mohamad.

That's my father's side. My mother's side is very much working class from Wales and north Devon. My grandfather was a policeman in South Wales; I have a great uncle who died in the First World War in Palestine, and he's buried in Syria in Damascus. Perhaps he saw Lawrence of Arabia sweeping past on a camel before he died.

So there are these two threads in my family that are very different. It's interesting how, when I was growing up, the Malay side was part of the "third world", as it were, but they were of an elite class; while my English side is very much a working-class family.

What are your strongest memories of the place where you grew up?

I remember a little bit about my life prior to England, but I'm not sure if these were spurred on by photographs or if they're really *my* memories. I remember my home in Kenny Hills, and I remember thinking *everyone* lived in some sort of version of Kenny Hills around Malaysia. I didn't realise then that it was actually a very privileged location.

I know people who have more memories of their early childhood, but I don't. I don't remember the time of my father's death: everything sort of went blank, and then I sort of "woke up" again several months later when we'd moved to the UK.

So my clearer memories are from England. I enjoyed it there. I would play with the neighbouring kids, and we'd have a lot of freedom to do what we wanted. I don't think kids today have that kind of freedom. We would play in the woods. I enjoyed the nature and countryside, which I don't really have a chance to do in Malaysia.

I don't know if this is just England or adolescence in general, but I had a lot of freedom growing up, and I experimented a lot with... well, ways of living.

Did you feel much connection to your Malay heritage?

Malaysian, perhaps, not so much Malay. I didn't draw a distinction; I didn't *know* to draw a distinction. I knew, of course, that my family was Malay as opposed to Chinese or whatever, but I still felt that there was this big family called "Malaysians". And although whenever I visited here it was in a very Malay milieu, it didn't strike me as being very alien from a Chinese one or the Indian one next door.

I was very aware of being Malaysian; I never thought to change my passport, and I had a Malaysian flag over my bed. When people visited me in boarding school, they'd always bring Malaysian food, serunding, and the other boarders would go, "Ew, it's disgusting, it's like dried worms!" And then they'd taste it and realise it was delicious, and the bastards would eat it all behind my back *(laughs).*

Did you ever face discrimination for being of mixed parentage?

Not for a second. I don't think I look particularly Asian. I got beaten up a few times, but not because of being Asian, but just for being "different" — skinheads beat up anybody who are not skinheads. But not because of [ethnicity].

I used to make [the] most of being Malaysian, and would concoct fanciful stories of my background and upbringing in an attempt to impress the girls, make myself sound very exotic. I once said I was a prince of some description, but it never worked ... I would mix with republicans and socialists, mainly, and they were never particularly impressed with that sort of thing.

What stories do you hold on to from your family?

Nothing specific comes to mind. I hear little snippets here and there and I begin to mash them up with my Datuk Hamid stories, and sometimes I forget whether it's real or not.

My brother Karim is the one who has taken it upon himself to be the guardian or custodian of the family biography. I have not. I want stories that are more Malaysian, rather than just Malay. A great number of people retain their individual cultural identity, but it's always thrilling to me, and moving, whenever I see people freely move into common ground. It's not necessarily unique in the world, but it's pretty damn near unique.

England prides itself on being a multicultural society, but the immigrant society is probably not more than 5%, and yet there is so much talk about cultural identity. Here, Chinese [Malaysians are] the minority, 30% to 35% — which shouldn't count as a minority! That would make them a major stakeholder in a company!

So it's not that I'm not interested in history. I am. But when I start feeling that my history is being claimed by some purely Malay, nationalistic, separate-from-everybody-else's history, then it upsets me, because it's just not true. Our history — the Chinese, the Indians, the different *types* of Malay [Malaysians] — are all touched by everybody else. And we should be aware of that, and we should give credit for that.

Speaking of history — tell me more about this book on Malaysian histories that you're working on.

It's going to be about people's history, not top-down; I want to ignore the great leaders. I've been spending a lot of time in the archives, reading about everyday people who lived here then. There was this thing called the *Selangor Journal*, which was the precursor to the *Malay Mail*; it mentioned a Professor Lawrence, a balloonist who came to town in 1890s, and he asked for money so he could get his balloon up in the air, take people up and get a look at Kuala Lumpur.

So he got money from some towkay, and over at the Chinese Club — I have no idea what the Chinese Club is — he took the balloon up. It struck me that that would have been the first time anyone had had an aerial view of Malaysia then. So I want to write about what they saw, what was beneath them in KL at the time.

It's not going to be the story of sultans; it's the little stories — stories about "nothing" that say plenty.

And on the topic of stories: in *Confessions of an Old Boy*, the protagonist Datuk Hamid Datuk Sidek is a civil servant of the Tunku Abdul Rahman generation who recounts his adventures in pre- and post-independence Malaya/Malaysia. Do you agree with your fictitious character Datuk Hamid's views?

Yes and no. I don't agree with the idea of this country, or any people, being led by elite who think they have some sort of divine right to lead. Datuk Hamid does. If he and I were to meet, that would be one area we'd definitely disagree upon.

One thing that existed in his time was the self-identifying Malay who I think was not so culturally threatened by others — bearing in mind that his culture had already been subsumed by Western culture, and he was very comfortable with that, and that his notion of Malayness was very romantic. So yes, the cultural atmosphere they lived in — inquisitive, self-secure... I would like that.

I think it still exists, but we're being denied it. I know of [people who have] lost all interest in this place. It's a great, great shame. Many people are leaving Malaysia; and we also have this "internal emigration", where people have closed their minds off: *Forget it, I don't care about this place anymore, this is not my country.*
They live here, work here, but they're no longer here. This is great shame, and I'd like to play

my part in trying to persuade these people to "return".

So what do you hope for the future of Malaysia?

I don't want to be too hard on present-day Malaysia, because if it were a really [bad] place, I wouldn't have been able to have come back and fit in, and I wouldn't have been able to write anything that anybody could ever appreciate. In many respects, this must surely be the kind of Malaysia I want.

But the kind of people that I can relate to — mostly middle-class — are being brow-beaten and being pushed into little corners. We're losing touch with each other, and I don't want that. I know young people who are Chinese, Malay or Indian [Malaysian], who don't know anybody who *isn't* Chinese, Malay or Indian [Malaysian]. Race is fascinating and is wonderful, and it shouldn't be divisive; it would be a shame if we lost touch with that.

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