

## **Yu-Mei BALASINGAMCHOW**

### **A Few Thoughts on Feminism and Writing in Singapore**

It's hard to talk about feminism in Singapore. To outsiders, Singapore looks like a modern city-state where women have the opportunity to wear power suits, become doctors and lawyers, and run the nation's sovereign wealth fund. Girls—and boys—are literate and well-educated, and roughly equal numbers of men and women have university education or more. Many Orientalized stereotypes of repressive gender violence don't apply to us: women don't have bound feet; child marriages are rare; female infanticide is unheard of.

It is also difficult to talk about feminism because there is a knee-jerk tendency to dismiss it as an imported Western idea, irrelevant or ill-suited to the Singapore context. Some people, unfortunately, still think that feminism is only about burning bras or hating men or taking opportunities away from men. You cannot get elected into political office by saying you're a feminist. In everyday conversation, you have to explain that being a feminist means that you're for gender equality, that it's not a zero-sum game, that when women's welfare improves so does men's, and that women's rights do not come at the expense of anyone else's.

This means that it can be very easy and also very difficult to be a woman in Singapore. I've benefited from the best the system can offer: I've been to good schools—both coed and girls' schools—and I've never had a teacher or a boss tell me that I couldn't do something just because I was a girl or a woman.

But if I were in a blue-collar job, I would earn 30 percent less than my male colleagues. If I got pregnant, I would be entitled to maternity leave—but taking the time off would affect my promotion prospects, or I might lose my job or be asked to leave, and there is little the law would do to protect me. If I were a working mother, I would be worried about the lack of work-life balance, the high cost of childcare and the ethical issues involved in hiring a live-in caregiver.

So while Singapore is not in a terrible situation, it is also not truly progressive. There is plenty of room to improve both legislation and socially acceptable behavior so that women and men and people of all sexual orientations and affiliations can lead lives that are not limited by discriminatory practices or gender-based barriers.

What role, then, for literature?

Since I started writing, I have found no shortage of women writers, editors and readers to engage with—as well as men, of course. But it remains that the majority of publishers, gatekeepers and local literary prizewinners are men. No one has done an exhaustive study of this, and I'm merely speculating here, but women in the literary scene probably struggle with the issues that I've mentioned above. They are extremely well-educated and have lots of brilliant ideas, but how do you find time to think and read and write if you have children and you are viewed as being primarily responsible for their care? When Singapore is the most expensive city in the world, how do you convince your parents, your spouse or yourself that it's okay to quit your job to write, that it's not a “waste” of your education? How can we encourage more women—and men—who aren't privileged or wealthy to write?

Besides the practical hurdles, another challenge is the imaginative one. Writing in English today in Singapore, we don't often ask if what we write is reinforcing the status quo or challenging it. Are we giving our characters agency? Are we deepening human sympathy by presenting individual voices, not stereotypes? I'm not suggesting that literature should be used as a soapbox or a bully pulpit, or that books should be populated only with strong women who make impeccable, politically progressive decisions. But I think that writing can be ethical—not moralistic, not propagandistic, but conscious of where it treads and who or what it is treading on.

In a speech at the National Book Awards in the U.S. last year, Ursula K. Le Guin said, “Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words.” At its very best, literature coaxes us into caring about imaginary people and situations far removed from our own—worlds in which girls—and boys—can do anything or be anyone. Girls can be boys and boys can be girls—or they can be someone else altogether.