

Charmaine Leung, *17A Keong Saik Road: A Personal Story*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2017. 270 pp. ISBN 978-981-11-3066-3.

Charmaine Leung's *17A Keong Saik Road: A Personal Story* is undoubtedly one of the most gripping narratives this reviewer has come across in recent times. At one level it is an autobiographical – “personal” – story that makes use of the documentary mode to amount to a record of a marginal underbelly of Singapore the modern metropolis. Yet, through such an intersection of the autobiographical, biographical and the socio-historical, as required by the documentary, it transcends its personal dimension and assumes larger cultural importance. Vera Brittain, the noted memoirist of the World War I, once wrote about her intention to make her memoir *Testament of Youth* (1933) “as truthful as history, but as readable as fiction” (Brittain 77). The same can be said of Leung's debut narrative venture. In the process, not only is the gap between the personal and the political reduced to a chimera, but also, practically, the personal emerges as an essential ingredient in an effective imagination of the collective, the cultural. Indeed, as the author rightfully claims in the “Author's Note” at the end of the book, “this is not just my story, or my family's story. I feel it is a people's story” (269).

17A Keong Saik Road tells the story of the struggle of three generations of Malaysian women – the first two of which largely uneducated, working class people – since the 1930s to the present, in a predominantly patriarchal set up. The author herself is a member of the third generation, a veritable first-generation learner, recounting the history of her mother(s) and grandmother(s), marginalised and forgotten non-agents in mainstream history. Looking back at an unrecorded and obscure maternal lineage from her independent and confident middle-class woman's vantage point – which is introduced in the first chapter of the book – Leung begins the second chapter thus in a sombre, elegiac tone with a note on the beginning of the life of her mother: “In December 1938, in a rural village in Selangor in West Malaysia, a baby girl named Koon was born to a family. Koon was the third and the youngest girl born into this family – a family that could scarcely afford to have any children” (15). Koon, the burdensome girl child, sold by the family to make two ends meet, would embark upon an incredible journey that sees her wade through the vicissitudes of fortune, saved miraculously at various turns of life by women who take her under their wings, to end up as a brothel operator at 17 Keong Saik Road. It is this “other” Singapore, where she grew up, which the author revisits in this book in nostalgia and tribute. Yet she does this also from the modern citizen's perspective, and thus oscillates throughout the narrative between two Singapores – one, the dazzling futuristic metropolis and the other, the dark underbelly of a city in the making. Thus she celebrates “a picture-perfect Singapore illustrating the advancement and

achievements that she had made over the years” (8) and laments that “it was also a different Singapore” (9) in the same breath.

The “other” Singapore, is an amazing locale where colourful narratives accumulate and germinate. Some of them are traditional folk narratives that travel from their roots to the cosmopolitan space, while others are oral tales born here to capture and make somewhat bearable the difficulties of these struggling women. In the process, a new fringe community of self-made women, a cosmopolitan sisterhood, is born, an assembly unique and anachronistic in the modern metropolis in its radical humaneness. Leung’s “creative non-fiction” is replete with the stories and histories of the lives of innumerable such nondescript but extraordinary women. The remarkable journeys from the provincial locations to the burgeoning city by women, primarily in search of livelihood, provide them with greater exposure and visibility, but only at the cost of cultural dislocation and a history of struggle for independence and dignity, and often a complete loss of earlier identity. Koon, for example, was rechristened “Happy Jade” by her foster-mother Yu Lin, herself

an immigrant who came from Xi Qiao Town in Foshan in the Guangdong Province of Mainland China, [and] arrived in Singapore in the mid-1930s, several years after her sister, Yu Fu, had come to settle here. The Yu sisters were among a group of Chinese women from Guangdong province who journeyed to Nanyang in search of a better life. These Chinese women – courageous forebears who laid the foundations for the Chinese culture and community in Singapore – left their families, mainly comprising elderly parents and younger siblings, to find work in Singapore. Many of them were in the twenties, and came from the same village. (24-25)

These journeys were often undertaken to beat the social circumstances of the early twentieth century China where women were often expected to remain uneducated child-bearers and unpaid servants, and unmarried women were stigmatised social outcasts. *17A Keong Saik Road* is a glimpse into the history and sociology of the lives of the courageous foremothers like Yu Lin “whose desire to be independent and make a living for herself was deeply frowned on in her hometown” (25).

The newly formed home, or “clans” (26) formed by these immigrant women, Leung informs us through some wonderful snippets, were marked by most of the features of a close-knit historical community with well-developed conventions, codes-of-conduct and well-defined internal hierarchies in place. Thus we have the Ma Jes, the Pei Pa Zais and the Dai Gu Liongs – different categories of workers and entertainers – in a fluid but disciplined social order largely free from patriarchal oppression, which even made possible a frequently entered female bonding that “went beyond the platonic nature of sisterhood” (28). Leung’s mother’s foster mother, Yu Lin, herself was a ma je, “a Cantonese term used for

women who came to Singapore from Guangdong to be domestic workers” (27-28). The culture is, of course, not exclusively about the female workers; male migrants like coolies, domestic helps and so on also find a place in the narrative. In the process, what emerges is a fascinating history of the evolution of the Chinatown in Singapore in all its aspects – its demography and architecture, domestic space and the marketplace, opium and gambling dens and massage parlours, work-culture, festivals, cuisines and other entertainments and so on – spanning over the entire twentieth century. And the history of the place and its people, of the physical and the mental culture of the place, is recounted from the perspective of the empathetic yet detached insider rather than that of a merely sympathetic middle-class observer from outside.

Growing up in a brothel area through one’s childhood and early adolescence, especially as a girl child, as the author of the work did before moving to Hong Kong, of course, is an unenviable predicament. It entails severe physical and mental pressure that can have durable, even indelible, traumatic aftermaths. The childhood memoir offers a detailed, intimate account of a girl’s childhood spent at 15A in a female-only family-set up under the tutelage of an exceptionally kind-hearted and protective-turned alcoholic nanny, her “Kai Por” – whose own pathetic life-history is the subject of one of the many such subplots woven into the texture of the narrative – with her mother busy managing the operations of the brothel, inherited from Yu Lin, to earn her livelihood at 17A, and her father forced by circumstances to stay away at Hong Kong. From the little girl’s experience of being mysteriously instructed by her mother not to disclose her identity, even her address, at school, through her marginal entity there and a slowly developed inferiority complex, the clandestine and shameful atmosphere enveloping her existence, the leering gaze of the male customers in the vicinity to forming a love-hate relationship with her mother – the girl had a handful in making her way to a successful and “respectable” middle class identity through a series of impediments. What sustained her all the way and gave her life an existential-cultural mooring was, again, a cluster of beautiful female bondings with unrelated women of several generations within and outside “home.” As the author herself writes towards the end of the narrative, “I was too young then to realise how precious our sisterhood was to me, but now, I know it is one of the best things I could ever possess in my life” (259).

No matter how incredible Leung’s personal journey may seem to us from an ensconced middle class perspective, as her heart-warming account attests, it is by no means an exceptional travail. On the contrary, it has been deeply symptomatic of the obscure, subaltern women’s will to fashion their selves in an independent and dignified manner. “From the unwavering courage and faith displayed in the journeys of the *ma je, pei pa zai*, and *dai gu liong* – all marginalised, forgotten women of the past, who despite their difficulties, persevered in working towards the hope of a better future – I learnt strength” (263). As she discussed with her

aging mother her plan to write a book detailing the nuances of their “secret” hi/story, she sensed that gradually “the burden of guilt and shame lifted from her” (266). Storytelling/historytelling, thus has been the class-transgressed daughter’s therapeutic way of coming back to her roots, physically and figuratively, and of paying tributes and repaying her debts to her mothers across generations. Such “personal stories,” or “people’s stories,” indeed, need to be told, and histories recorded.

Works Cited

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