

Josephine Chia, *Frog Under a Coconut Shell* [2002]. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2010. 325 pp. ISBN 978-981-4276-84-9.

Readers with an interest in diasporic *Peranakan* Chinese writings, the multiculturalism of Singapore in the 1950s and 60s, and the lived practices of the Peranakan or Straits Chinese, a hybrid community that blends Malay customs, language, cuisine and mode of dressing with Chinese culture, should find *Frog Under a Coconut Shell*, a fascinating read. This memoir interweaves past and present and the lives of two strong women, the author and her mother in multicultural Singapore, apart from documenting the rich linguistic and cultural heritage of the Peranakan community which is slowly dying. Importantly, the memoir provides the platform for the author to render her views and perspectives on issues relating to identity, gender, ethnicity, class, and culture. Clearly, it is also a recuperative project for the author, as the memoir helps to recapture silenced and marginalised voices of Peranakan women living on the periphery of a Chinese majority Singapore.

Frog Under a Coconut Shell is a literal translation of a Malay idiom “Katak di Bawah Tempurung” which, essentially, likens someone to a frog that lives under a coconut shell, believing that the shell is its entire world. In this story, the proverbial frog is Josephine’s (the author’s) mother, who is imprisoned “by her debilitating mortal mind” (78) because of Alzheimer, a physical disease that had affected her ability to remember her past and to think clearly. Ironically, it is the same mother, although poor and uneducated, who had in her younger days, struggled and fought against her husband to enable her daughter, Josephine, to receive an education. In the process, she freed her own daughter from her cloistered and parochial existence in the *kampung* (village). The husband, a typical patriarch, believed that education was bad for women as they poisoned their minds and made them less meek.

Frog Under a Coconut Shell is written by a diasporic Peranakan writer who treks into the past to reveal the strength and fortitude of her mother, Soon Neo (*Mak*), as she struggled against abject poverty, oppression, patriarchy and later on with Alzheimer, a disease that had progressively weakened her mental faculties. Mak’s family was plunged from richness to rags because of her father’s excessive gambling habit and accumulated debt which tragically resulted in his suicide. To escape their debtors, the family moved from Malaysia to Singapore and settled in a hut on the edge of a Malay *kampung*. Setting aside her own grief, Mak took charge of the family and came to terms with their change in fortune although she was only 16 going on 17.

The memoir then chronicles her life after her marriage to a violent, insecure and possessive husband, Chia Tong Yong (*Ab Tetia*), who had physically abused

her and Josephine, his very own daughter, on many occasions. The latter had also suffered and endured beatings from her equally jealous and possessive first husband. But this did not embitter them in any way as they persevered to succeed in life. Mak's children are all highly educated and are doing well in life. Together, they have rallied around to look after their ailing Alzheimer-afflicted mother in her twilight years. Josephine had divorced her first husband and remarried an American and went on to fulfil her dream of becoming a writer. The memoir then recounts Josephine's own story and the challenges that she faced when traversing geographical, cultural and emotional boundaries as she had to straddle two countries, the United States and Singapore, to care for two families whom she deeply loves. At the end of the day, the two women's resilience and unfailing spirit to survive against all odds earn our admiration. Importantly, the memoir helps to dispel the myth that Asian women are forever tragic, helpless and defenceless victims in a feudalistic patriarchal society.

In recounting Mak's and her own story, Josephine has also offered a glimpse of the harsh realities of Singapore in the 1950s and 60s. It stood in stark contrast to modern day squeaky clean Singapore as *Kampung Potong Pasir* which was home to Josephine and her family had "no bathroom, toilet, running water or electricity" (87); it was a place where "rats and cockroaches ran about" (86) under the wooden platform which served as the floor of their kampung house, and where outdoor latrines overflowed with filth and human excrement. There was extreme poverty in this kampung and the children, including Josephine and her siblings, augmented the family's meagre income by selling food items and snacks. School was a luxury that many could not afford. Issues of class are explored by the author as the kampung's squalid and derelict conditions are juxtaposed with the posh homes of their colonial masters and other richer Chinese families who lived uphill. Racial discrimination is also examined as the Peranakans were not accepted by the dominant Chinese community because they were of mixed breed, were darker in complexion and they spoke Hokkien with Malay words.

Amidst the squalor, there was a kind of *joie de vivre* among the kampung dwellers. The author is nostalgic about the "lovely camaraderie" (63) shared by the multiracial people who lived in this kampung. It was a closely knit neighbourhood, one where their "front and back doors were hardly ever closed till bedtime and people talked to neighbours and looked out for one another" (63) – a far cry from present day apartment housing in Singapore which forever remains shut to the neighbours. Kampung dwellers participated in common activities such as watching films on screens that were erected in open air badminton courts. The memoir captures life in the 1950s and 60s through her depiction of hawkers, usually Indian immigrants who plied their trade when films were shown, selling local snacks such as *kacang putih* (sugar coated peanuts), *kacang kuda* (steamed chick peas), and slices of bread slapped thinly with *nyonya kaya*, "an amber-coloured egg jam" (64). These

snacks were placed in square wooden trays that were carried by the hawkers “on their cloth bound heads” (64).

In documenting life in Singapore in the 1950s and 60s, especially the way in which the Peranakans had lived then, the author manages to “collect a history for (her)self” (78) and etch it into memory so that her descendants can “recall it as though it has always been there” (78). In this regard, the memoir will appeal to Peranakan enthusiasts as it records their hybrid creole language, dress, food items and cultural practices. Peranakan language blends linguistic items borrowed from the Malay language and this is illustrated in the author’s and Mak’s speech which ends with the suffix “lah” as in “Aiyah, sooooo nice, *lah*” (15), the use of “one” for the purposes of emphasis at the end of a sentence and Malay words as in “*Mati, lah, Die lah! Sure get killed one*” (16). Last but not least, the use of reduplication to convey a sense of how, when, where or why as in “It was hot-hot night” (15); “She was snore-snore, her jaw loose. I quickly-quickly drape sarong around me...” (15).

Many passages devoted to descriptions of Peranakan attire such as the *kebaya panjang* worn by Josephine’s slender and beautiful *Nyonya Bibik* mother are interwoven into the memoir. The *kebaya panjang* was an attire favoured by the “older women as the material for the kebaya top was either made from pure cotton or raw silk” (19), the younger women showing a preference for “see through voile” (19) instead. Mention is made of kebaya accessories such as the “*kerosang rantai*” (15), a gold chain that linked three brooches which held together the front of the kebaya top, the use of the “elaborate goldpin” in the mother’s bun, and the red kerchief which was “slung over one shoulder” (19).

The author has also described how spices were ground and chilli paste were made using the *batu giling*, a granite rolling pin, and *batu lesong*, a granite mortar and pestle which have now been replaced by the indispensable electric blender. Peranakan food and delicacies fill the pages of this memoir for many reasons. It functions to preserve authentic Peranakan food that is slowly being erased from the younger generation’s memory and to show how it can also bring together people of different generations and races together. As the author poignantly remarks, “Mother has held the family together for such a long time, not in a matriarchal manner but by her love and ability to cook” (247). This memoir, as such, is significant as it does not just celebrate Mak’s life but it also reveals the important role played by women as cultural transmitters, folk wisdom and values through the stories that they tell. However, at times, in trekking the past, the author may have romanticised a bygone era and have also presented the Peranakan as an exotic group of people. In this case, she may have, inadvertently, reaffirmed certain worn-out stereotypes of the Peranakan community.

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