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The New Sexuality

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Panel: The new sexualities. The author discusses the role that sexuality and gender roles play in their work Does literature mirror society, or nudge it along?

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The New Sexuality

By Amanda Lee Koe (Singapore)

Gertrude Stein once said: “Literature—creative literature—unconcerned with sex, is inconceivable.” Whilst my writing is quite frequently concerned with sex, I must say that such a proclamation is perhaps too militant. “Inconceivable” is a strong word. I would prefer to say that nothing is inconceivable, and that sex can be a powerful tool, but a tool is not a cause, a paintbrush is not a painting.

As writers, I think we dislike interpreting our own work, and in any case, I would have preferred to extrapolate from and examine the work of infinitely more hallowed authors—from Nabokov to Nin—to see how their work, intertwined with sexuality and/or gender, functions—or not—in relation to society, but since I’m meant to talk about my own work at this panel, I’ll have to ask you to bear with me as I make two quick dips in this small, allotted space.

Queerness

I have a story, “Siren,” in which I basically queer the Merlion, one of the most prominent symbols of Singapore, re-imagining it as a somewhat transgendered being, and the psyche of the repulsion and eroticism that can take place in encounters with the “Other” in society. Besides raising questions of the origins of identity and the mythologisation of artifice, “Siren” critiques the judgment passed on people outside gender binaries in a society that has been historically steeped in conservative Asian values, and garnished more recently by Western liberalism as aped via the mass media.

I read “Siren” at Bard Early College in New Orleans, and was asked by a student if there had been any negative reception to the strong, alternative sexuality that appears in the work. Though sex between two men is still illegal in Singapore, as per Section 377A of the Penal Code, an archaic post-colonial hangover, “Siren” has been looked upon rather favourably, and through my body of work it seems that readers have considered me “edgy”, I hope, for the right reasons: in that I am pulling things apart and pushing the limits of how we envisage them, and *not* because I write freely about sex and gender.

Hysteria

Not all sexuality has to do with sex, as in love scenes, as in intercourse per se. There’s also plain female sexuality. Yet the notion of female sexuality and/or emotion has often been coded as “hysteria”, as “nymphomania”, as “the madwoman in the attic”. The root word for “hysteria” comes from the Greek word for “womb”. This is the stuff that gets Simone de Beauvoir all riled up. Why is it said that men write the big and bold and exterior, whilst women are consigned and resigned to the domestic and personal and interior? That men write about ideas, and women about feelings?

I have a story, “Chick,” which explores the young female psyche. There was an editor in Singapore who seemed to really dislike this piece, though I think she was too polite to say so. And I feel that it wasn’t because it was poorly written, but because it was being looked at as being too personal, too emotional—and therefore it was automatically seen as having no larger social relevance or literary value. Perhaps writing being written off as “emo” is even more condescending than what went before—writing being written off as “hysteria”. For in hysteria there is still a kind of hushed, fearful awe, that this woman is dangerous, that she ought be locked away. But with modern science and feminist theory, the taint of abnormal psychology has worn off, leaving us with a deadened sense of “oh she’s just being *emotional*”.

Just because something is personal does not mean it is insular. Just because something is sexual does not mean it is not textual. Just because something is feminine does not mean it is

weak. But I am probably too young and too late to fly this flag—though of course literature is a constant game—which is already so well hoisted and flown by female authors ranging from Virginia Woolf to Jeanette Winterson.

To conclude, there is no such thing as sex or gender “in and of itself”: any work of serious literature attempts to make a significant comment on, or trans-creation of, human experience as the author knows it, and insofar as this goes, sexuality is only a thematic tool in the employ of a writer. I therefore find that there is nothing in fact remarkable about the portrayal of frank sexuality and the subversion of gender roles in my work, nor in the work of any other author of—not to sound pompous—“serious literature”, because the premise of the depiction of such sexuality is a means to an end and never an end in itself. There is nothing “new” about sexuality, even when we, as writers, think we are renewing it, for sexuality is timeless. What *is* remarkable, though, are the constant possibilities of discursive conversations we can open up and have in this symbiosis of writing and reading, in understanding our time and lot on this planet, together—this is what is at once new, and timeless.