

Addressing social issues of national importance: domestic violence

Seventh of ten fortnightly articles for Star Two, published on 9 July 2017

So far, we have been exploring novels concerned with nation-building in terms of our ethnic differences – how do we forge social integration or national unity out of our diversity? This, of course, is not the only way to write about the nation. One can also write about the nation in terms of the social issues that have far-reaching consequences for the way the nation develops as a civil society.

Domestic abuse, the violent oppression of women and children, is one such issue.

It is an issue that our English-language novelists have been addressing for a very long time. The earliest exploration of the psychological impact of abuse of minors is Lee Kok Liang's novella, *The Mutes in the Sun* (1962), about how an adolescent boy, victim of his widower father's psychological abuse, has to cope with his father's taking his best friend's girlfriend as his mistress soon after his best friend's mysterious disappearance.

In most of the novels published before 1994, all written by men, female victims of gender-based discrimination or abuse are usually portrayed as being from underprivileged or tradition-bound homes and having little education.

It was not until women novelists appeared on the local literary scene in 1994, that we find stories of domestic abuse occurring in better-educated and economically well-off homes. Among the novels are my novel, *Echoes of Silence* (1994), Ellina Abdul Majid's *Perhaps in Paradise* (1997) and Marie Gerrina Louis' *The Eleventh Finger* (2000).

The publication dates of these novels, particularly *Perhaps in Paradise* and *The Eleventh Finger*, are significant because they coincide with the passing of the Domestic Violence Act (1994) passed in 1996 after much debate, and the Child Act (2001).

Perhaps in Paradise is the first novel in English by a Malay woman, and the second by a Malay author (the first was Shamsuddin Tajuddin's *The Price Has Been High* published in 1984). It is
By Chuah Guat Eng. Writing the Nation. Article 7 for Star Two_ 3rd July 2017.

a slim novel (197 pages) and is described on the front cover as “a bittersweet, nostalgic novel about growing up”. But it is, in fact, a serious novel about domestic abuse in a Malay elite family living in Kuala Lumpur during the 1960s and 1970s. The victim of abuse is Rose, the eldest of a government ministry official’s three daughters. But the story is told by Karina (Kina), the youngest daughter, who is away at school in England when the main events in Rose’s life are taking place.

Kina’s youth and her physical distance from her family are important narrative strategies because they lend an ironic edge to her account of events; we, the readers, know (or can guess) what is really happening, but she does not. Her experiences of family life before leaving for England are told from her perspective as a child. She tells us about Rose’s teenage romantic escapades with the same innocence and non-understanding that she tells us about the May 1969 riots and the 1971 “Big Flood” in Kuala Lumpur – and she makes judgements that are echoes of what she hears the adults say.

While at school, she learns of Rose’s “accidents” and injuries in the same way she learns of political events such as the 1974 student demonstrations in Baling – through her parents’ letters and their perspectives. When she returns home, her narrative takes us through the various stages of her response to the truth of Rose’s abuse: moral judgment, denial, shame, silence, and the desire to forget. The “growing up” lesson Kina learns is that she lives in a world where appearance and looking good take priority over individual happiness.

But for the reader, the lesson is that we, too, go through the same process – of seeing without understanding, learning through hearsay, judging, denying, and remaining silent – which allows domestic abuse to continue unchecked and unpunished in our society.

The Eleventh Finger, Louis’s third novel, is about parental abuse. The central character is Li Lian. Throughout her childhood, she, her mother, and her two older sisters have been brutally abused by her father because he thinks females are useless and he badly wants a son. When she is 12, her mother dies in unusual circumstances, and her father is charged with manslaughter and sent to prison. As an adult, she plots to take revenge on her father’s mistress, whom she blames for her mother’s death.

This, however, is not a simple revenge crime thriller. Although the focus is on Li Lian, nearly all the characters, from different social and economic classes, have suffered some form of physical or emotional parental abuse.

The novel is a reminder of the prevalence of child abuse, of the injustice we do to the victims when we treat as “unreliable” what they know from personal experience to be the truth, and of the many handed-down beliefs we cling to as truths that are far less reliable.

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