The original little Nonya

In the 18th of a monthly column featuring ground-breaking works of local literature, we look at Emily Of Emerald Hill by Stella Kon

When we first meet Emily Gan, the sometime matrarch of a 1950s Peranakan household is making a series of phone calls, deftly switching her tone of voice as she speaks to different people. She is deliberately casual with a sister-in-law; posh and condescending while with boys like that. I have told you before how her sisters-in-law should study (England) and what (law): "You will never do anything to make me sad, will you? You'll do everything that I want you to do." But inevitably, someone tries to break out of her suffocating embrace. Her son sends a letter from England saying he has left the university to work as a home-riding instructor's assistant - "I like working with horses, and I wasn't ever very keen about going into Mr Chan's law office." The irony: It was she who had encouraged her son to take up horse riding in the first place, in order to dear him to his horse racing-mad grandfather and thus ensure he would inherit the bulk of the old man's fortune. The intrepid Emily makes haste to England (eschewing the slow boat for a new-fangled aeroplane), where she rages against her son's foolishness and unfilialness in the melodramatic, guilt-tripping fashion of traditional Asian mothers: "You forgot everything I've given you, you throw away all the sacrifices I've made, you drag down all my hopes into the mudd... I should have hanged myself first, before I have a son like you!"

Her methods are more subtle when it comes to her unfaithful husband, who keeps a mistress and even moves out of Emerald Hill to stay with her at one point. Instead of ranting and wailing, Emily dutifully continues to tend to his needs, getting servants to send him fresh clothes, elaborate home-cooked meals and even reminds about various appointments.

But what Emily comes to learn is that while she can dictate their lives, she cannot win their hearts.

Her son kills himself, her husband returns home but refuses to see her on his deathbed. Emily remains at the reins of the household, but she gradually changes from being the sun around which everyone else revolves to being abandoned and isolated at its centre.

At the end of the play, we feel the loneliness of Emily, sitting in her house on Emerald Hill as the sounds of construction and traffic sweep through its four walls - a changing Singapore which the matriarch, once the master manipulator, cannot understand, let alone control.

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Emily Of Emerald Hill (SNP Editions, 2000) can be borrowed from most public libraries. The call number is SING 8822 KON.

Child of Emerald Hill

When her best-known play, Emily of Emerald Hill (1985), was performed at the prestigious Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1986, it was actually something of a homecoming for Singapore playwright Stella Kon. She was born in the Scottish city in 1944, where her father was studying medicine.

That said, she has deep roots in Singapore, hailing as she does from two prominent Singapore Peranakan families. Her maternal great-grandfather is Tan Tock Seng. She returned with her parents to Singapore at the age of three and grew up in the family mansion on Emerald Hill with three brothers and a sister. Educated at Raffles Girls' School and the then University of Singapore, Kon started writing at a young age. She married in 1966 (she has since divorced) and lived in Ipoh, Malaysia, for 15 years, followed by about five years in Edinburgh before her sons, Mark and Luke, attended university.

Through it all, she continued to write and stayed in close touch with the literary scene here. Her first published work, a story called Mushroom Harvest, appeared in the anthology Twenty-Two Malaysian Stories, edited by Lloyd Fernandes, in 1968. She won the Singapore National Playwriting Competition in 1979, 1982 and 1985, the last for Emily. Kon returned to Singapore in 1986, and continues to write and remain involved in the local literary and theatre scenes. She received a Singapore Literature Prize Merit Award in 1994 for her novel Etono, and is currently theatre group Musical Theatre Limited's president. She has six grandchildren.

First Words

Stephanie Yap

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