

IRRESPONSIBLE SEX, RESPONSIBLE LOVE, & MARRIAGE  
SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN:  
A SINGAPORE BUTTERFLY'S PERSPECTIVE

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Before we talk about sex, let me talk a little about my connection to the Philippines. My journey to the Philippines began in the early 1980s with Professor Lucille Hosilos and in 1992 when I met Frankie Sionil Jose.

Professor Hosilos taught a course on Comparative Literature at the National University of Singapore when I was there as an adult student. I recall leaving home at 6:15 every morning in those days so that I could be in the university by 7:30 A.M. and write in the canteen till 10 A.M. when the first lecture or tutorial would start. I had an old 10lb Olivetti typewriter that I lugged on the bus to the university. Manual typewriters are noisy. I needed a place where I could type without disturbing my fellow students. I was very shy and didn't want people to know that I was not writing my thesis. Professor Hosilos was very kind. She didn't ask too many questions. She knew I wasn't writing my thesis. So she quietly offered me the use of her office when she took a short sabbatical. I enjoyed that room for a month before the head of the social sciences department evicted me. Luckily, the editor of the Singapore University Press took pity on me and offered me a place in her storeroom. But I am forever grateful to Professor Hosilos. Her kindness gave me a room of my own to write what turned out to be my first novel, *Ricebowl*.

I met Frankie Sionil Jose when I won the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992. He was one of the judges with Professor Edwin Thumboo. What impressed me most at the prize-giving ceremony was his offer to meet those who did not win so that they could ask him questions about their writing. He did not talk to me. At least I don't remember if he did. About a few years later when he returned to the National University of Singapore, he asked to meet

me. That was when I felt his detached kindness. I use the word ‘detached’ as a compliment to describe kindness that does not expect gratitude. At that time, I was buried in the Ministry of Education, struggling to write while working full-time as a curriculum specialist. Frankie asked to have lunch with me so that he could tell me, ‘Suchen, you must write. Don’t ever give up. Write.’ Those words were like drops of water on a parched soul. I can still recall the scene. We were in the back seat of a taxi driving past the Botanic Gardens and Gleneagles Hospital. Blazing sunlight on the white walls of the hospital. Inside the taxi, Frankie took my hand. I was taken aback. He looked me in the eye and said, ‘Suchen, you must write. Don’t ever give up. Write.’ Thanks to Frankie, I didn’t give up.

### ***The Butterfly Writer***

My paper is entitled, ‘Irresponsible Sex, Responsible Love, and Marriage Somewhere In Between—a Singapore Butterfly’s Perspective.’ Why ‘butterfly’ you might ask. Well, I straddle two cultures, sometimes more, as a writer. When I think of love and lovers, I think not only of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, but also of Liang Shan Po and Chu Ying Tai in the fabled romance called ‘The Butterfly Lovers.’ In the opera version of the tale, the lovers died and turned into a pair of butterflies. My other reason for choosing ‘butterfly’ is that the writer’s imagination is like the flight of a butterfly; it doesn’t go straight as the crow flies. In the early years of our independence, the national emphasis was on efficiency, productivity, and being pragmatic and rational. Such emphasis is often translated into maxims like ‘Be creative but also sensible. Don’t cross the out-of-bounds markers’ or ‘You can be critical but your criticism must be constructive.’ Who determines what’s sensible, what’s constructive? The logical crows. The pragmatic birds which fly straight. They are so pragmatic that they do not fly far. They tend to hang around the city places where there is food, drawn by the material wealth of the city. The butterfly, on the other hand, flies willy-nilly. It flies with the wind, water, and sunlight. But this goes against Singapore’s national grain—the writer and the poet as butterflies flying with the flow of wind, water, and sunlight. In recent years, however, Singapore has discovered that creating spaces for butterflies to fly willy-nilly with wind, water, and sunlight is very good for the country in the long run. My novels are the products of a willy-nilly butterfly.

I will be quoting from *Fistful of Colours* and *A Bit of Earth*, which are set in Singapore and Malaysia. As I discuss each segment, I will leave it to the reader to place the segment either under Irresponsible Sex, Responsible Love, or Marriage Somewhere In Between.

### ***A Bit of Earth***

We will begin with a segment from *A Bit of Earth*. The year is around 1873 in Malaya in the tin mining district of Bandong, just before the British colonisers decided to bring law and order to the Malay state of Perak. Imagine two good friends who are trading partners, the fat Indian Muslim trader called Musa Talib and Tai-kor Wong, a Chinese tin miner and the head of the Cantonese clan. They are sailing up the Perak River, united by commerce and their views on women and sex. Tai-kor Wong is very pleased.

Musa had also initiated him into the pleasures provided by the Malay ladies, and he was particularly grateful to Musa for getting him a good woman in Bandong.

‘It’s no good, Che’ Wong, for a man to be alone,’ Musa said. ‘The Almighty Creator made women for men’s enjoyment, and we men have to show appreciation by taking pleasure in them.’ Tai-kor Wong thought that the Indian Muslim’s view of women was not so different from his own. He told Musa women were teacups and men, teapots. ‘One teapot can pour into many teacups, never one teacup into ‘many teapots.’ Musa laughed. ‘Let’s drink to that my friend!’(103)

*A Bit of Earth* begins with the drowning of an adulteress by a village of tin miners in the Malay state of Perak in 1873. A nameless Cantonese woman had committed adultery with a tin miner from the Hakka clan at a time when the Cantonese and Hakka clans were fighting over tin mining rights. This scene in the novel is based on a footnote in my history textbook when I was a young student. The adultery was cited as one of several causes of the tin mining wars in 19th century Perak that eventually led to the British colonisation of Malaya. This footnote was subsequently deleted when Malaysian and Singapore history textbooks were written by government-appointed committees of writers.

At times, writing history is similar to fiction writing. You leave out some things, and highlight some other things. Storytelling, after all, is embellishment. In my novel, I highlighted and embellished the deleted historical footnote and turned it into the opening chapter of *A Bit of Earth*. Imagine a village square full of angry men and women. A woman is tied up and made to kneel in front of a crowd who is stoning her. The fifteen-year-old hero of the novel, Wong Tuck Heng, watches as the men curse and throw stones at the woman. I quote:

Throughout ... the victim maintained a stoic expression. Is it strength or indifference? he wondered. He had never witnessed the punishment of an adulteress before, although he had heard stories of how such women were drowned in rivers and lakes back home in Sum Hor. He peered at the woman as he would a trapped rat. Even a rat would shriek when tortured, but she neither cringed nor whimpered.

Her silence incensed the mob.

‘Whip the bitch! Whip the lust out of her!’

The women started to flail her with bamboo poles. The louder the men urged, the harder the women hit. It was as if they had to prove their own fidelity to moral law. (22-24)

Was that about irresponsible sex or something else like powerlessness? History is filled with the silence of powerless women. Imagining the past enables us, the writers, to access the silenced voices of women in the male-dominated society of our past. The footnote in my secondary school history book gave the barebones of a human tragedy: an adulterous woman was silenced and drowned. The fate of her male lover was not mentioned. But the footnote suggests that national history is not simply about wars or constitutional developments. It shows that individual and personal events like the marriage or adultery of key individuals could change a nation's fate. Like the fluttering of a butterfly's wings, even a powerless woman could set off a chain of unforeseen consequences.

By the early 1900s, there were many rich immigrants in Singapore and Malaysia. Wealthy Chinese merchants like Wong Tuck Heng married two wives, a local-born wife and a China-born wife. Lai Fong, his China-born wife, had strong views about marriage. She had left her home in China and ‘travelled ten thousand li across the ocean to marry a stranger in a strange land’ that was Malaya. She regarded her marriage to Tuck Heng as an enduring friendship.

A friendship because they seldom came together as man and wife. And how did she feel about this? Feelings were clouds across the sky. They would change and pass. It wasn't important how she felt. It was more important what she could make out of her life in this country. (377)

Her husband, Tuck Heng was forward-looking in some ways and backward-looking in others. Like the fingers of her hand, his faults and virtues were of different lengths. A wife, if wise and patient, accepted her husband's hand and did not seek to cut off one of his fingers. Marital fidelity was not in the nature of man. Marriage was about mutual dependency, duty, loyalty and devotion. (376)

From sunrise to sunset, from one day to the next, till our black hair turns white, we eat, we sleep, we bear children and we watch them grow. We watch them get married and in turn bear children of their own. How time flies, we say to ourselves. Then one day we look down at our feet and we're surprised. Roots have sprouted in the ground of our being. (379-80)

Lai Fong's attitude towards men and marriage reflects an intelligent and down-to-earth acceptance of human frailties and a willingness and resourcefulness to work within the social perimeters for women of her time in the early 20th century. Marriage and immigration to Malaya offered Chinese immigrant women like Lai Fong the opportunity to develop into an independent woman who knew how to manage her husband's business. Was Lai Fong's relationship with her husband a marriage of somewhere between sex and love?

Love and marriage did not necessarily go together in Asian traditional cultures. Marriage was about building a family and doing one's duty as a wife and mother or husband and father. Islamic law required a husband to accord his wives equal treatment. No such customary law existed for the immigrant Chinese man to treat his wives equally. In the traditional Singaporean/Malayan Chinese family, there was no concept of equal treatment. Baba Wee had very good reasons for giving his first wife control over his household.

If a man's house is not in order, he won't have the peace of mind to go about his business. Every home should have only one head. Father and husband. Every kitchen also should have only one head, and that is the first wife, mother of all his children and the children of his other wives. Otherwise there'll be no peace. (132)

### *Fistful of Colours*

Next we turn to *Fistful of Colours*, set in Singapore in the 1980s. In real time, the novel is about a day's journey on the train from Singapore to a small town in Malaysia. In memory time, however, the novel spans 80 years of Singapore's history from the early 1900s to the 1980s. By the time the novel takes place, the women in Singapore are fighting their parents for the freedom to marry the man they love. To a modern woman like Nica Viswalingam, a sculptor in Singapore in the 1980s, sex was no longer the man's prerogative. Nica took control. She invited Mark Campbell, the Scottish boyfriend of her friend, Suwen, to pose nude for her in her apartment, 20 storeys above the city.

'Don't worry, you've got magnificent thighs,' she was clucking appreciatively like a connoisseur.

'Really?' He was beginning to throb.

'Do you like it when I do this?'

Her voice was low and husky, one he'd never heard before.

'Yes, yes.' His own voice sounded hoarse.

'And this way?'

'Yes, yes. Oh God, yes.'

'You love Suwen, don't you?'

'Yes, and I shouldn't be doing this. But no, carry on, yes, yes...'  
he was groaning. The pleasure was unbearable.

'What a magnificent charger. Now if you can just hold still, I'll do a lightning sketch of you like this. Phallus erectus.'

Then, and only then did it dawn on him that this had been her purpose. The sketch. (290)

The educated Southeast Asian women as represented by the heroines in *Fistful of Colours* took things into their own hands and chose their own destinies. Janice Wong chose to leave her Chinese Christian family to marry Zul, her English-educated Malay Muslim boyfriend. It was not easy. To end, here are two quotes from *Fistful* which show how racial prejudice played a part in a Singapore Chinese woman's decision to marry her Malay Muslim boyfriend. The first excerpt is from Joseph Wong, the enraged father of Janice Wong.

‘Listen, Suwen. ... We brought Janice to church every Sunday. Without fail, rain or shine! Sent her to Sunday School. Sent her for Bible class! We did our best for her! My wife and I! The church can’t blame us! No one can. For the way she has turned out! Except for Martha here. She was always giving in to the children ...

‘What for I work my butt off to send her to a good school? A good Christian school!’ the old man’s voice followed them, shouting into the hot afternoon air in the empty living room. ‘What for? The son’s a hopeless bum! The daughter’s a spineless bitch! No backbone! If she has any backbone, she will insist on her own beliefs. You are happy now, Martha? Proud of your two children? She is leaving. Disowning us! I can do the same, let me tell her! From this moment, pooi!’ he spat, ‘I have no daughter!’

He came into the kitchen and Suwen tensed in her seat....

‘Stop your bullying, Dad!’ Jan rushed out of her bedroom. ‘It’s not Mum! It’s me, your daughter! Scold me!’

‘I have no daughter! I have a bitch!’ (154-55)

Although love, sex, and marriage are personal matters, they often reveal, in the words of Zul:

[A] core of age-old prejudices, cockeyed perceptions and irrational fears. For as long as we mix and mingle in the comfortable confines of the marketplace, all is well; move beyond that into the personal and intimate areas, then the hub quivers and shakes like a machine into which one has accidentally poured water instead of oil. (144)

I would like to take you to the home of Janice Wong who is leaving her parents’ house to marry her English-educated Malay Muslim boyfriend, Zul, who is a journalist with the national newspaper, *The Straits Times*. Zul’s father is the imam (religious teacher) in a mosque. He’s in the hospital, writing a letter to his son about Zul’s mixed marriage to Janice Wong.

My son, I am an old man inclined to worry. Sometimes, unnecessarily. Tonight, I share with you the fear and worry in your mother’s heart and mine. ... Mak and I know that what you feel for Janice is not *bagai embun di hujung rumput* (a transient love that will pass like dew on the tip of a blade of grass). You will

marry her and you will have children. Mak and I worry that your children, that is to say our grandchildren, will be neither here nor there. Air yang tenang jangan sanku tiada buaya (don't think there are no crocodiles because the water is calm) ...

My son, I dread the day when the Malays and the Chinese clash, like on May 13, which I pray with all my soul, Insya-Allah, will never happen again. But, if the dreaded unforeseen should happen, what will become of your children, my grandchildren? Will my grandchildren be torn and be distrusted by both sides? You are a newspaper reporter and no stranger to the kind of ethnic troubles found in different parts of the world. ...

Please forgive an old man his pessimism... You have not told us very much about the parents of Janice Wong. Mak and I think that they are not happy about their daughter's plan to marry you. You are Muslim; they are Christians. And this can be one big area of trouble. Therefore, Mak and I were very, very happy, blessed be Allah the All Merciful, when you told us that Janice would be taking lessons at the Muslim Converts' Association. Allah be praised. Tell Janice that I welcome her into the community of believers. May she grow in understanding of the faith of the Great Prophet. She has great courage and great love for you, my son; love and cherish her. The heart of the old is faint, but that of the young is brave. I admire the courage of youth.

May Allah the Most Merciful and Compassionate guide you and Janice always.(277-79)

Although attitudes towards love, sex, and marriage have changed in Singapore, many of these remain 'unsaid, unsung and uncelebrated.' There is a rich field in Singapore waiting to be explored by the butterfly writer.

### Works Cited

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