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5 Between compliance and resistance

Women and the middle-class way of life in Singapore[1]

Nirmala PuruShotam

> How, then, does one register one's many disagreements from within this solidarity? For some years I have thought that one simply could not do so, that dissenting speech would probably be a betrayal of that solidarity. More recently, though, I have come to believe that such a position of willed neutrality is politically wrong, morally indefensible . . . . Suppression of criticism, I have come to believe, is not the best way of expressing solidarity.
>
> (Aijaz Ahmad 1992: 160)[2]

INTRODUCTION

In Singapore, a majority of women appropriate the label 'middle class' and work hard to reproduce an associated way of life for themselves and their families. This way of life embodies 'liberation' in local parlance for women: they are engaged in a middle-class life world with its attendant benefits, benefits denied to their mothers and grandmothers. I begin this chapter with a brief discussion of the Singapore middle class, arguing that to be middle class is to engage in the continuous reproduction of a middle-class way of life. That way of life is structured with reference to major texts/background knowledge that are common to most Singaporeans – living with a fear of falling (I am drawing on Ehrenreich's 1989 use of this term) and living within the normal family. This fear of falling places on women the burdens of reproducing a way of life that is at once about the 'better' life and about their subordination. Even while it imprisons them, this way of life gives women access to a body of knowledge that can bring about a questioning of their subordination. This raises a crucial question: are the meanings and experiences of being middle class creating, in any way, a new set of social interests that pressure the state to give women a new place in an established order?[3]

I address this issue as a feminist middle-class woman in Singapore. These categories are placed upon me both by others, as well as myself. While some writers use the word 'feminist' notionally, my use of the term is very specifically oriented to a conscious platform. Feminism, then, importantly involves a political position that is anti-patriarchal and, moreover, very sensitive to the inequities of the patriarchal system even at its more kindly. Indeed, I am clearly aware that women in a patriarchal system can and do enjoy the 'goodwill' of men as bread-winners and protectors: it is this that enables the re-production of patriarchy by women, without whose cooperation patriarchy would not be so easily assured of its continued social existence. For this reason, my work as a feminist activist, especially in the period in which this chapter was written, was inspired by a deep and abiding concern with consciousness-raising, especially pertinent to women who do not suffer the overt abuses of patriarchy. Those women, perhaps needless to say, include myself – married, middle class, professional and a mother. I do not write on behalf of all middle-class women in Singapore, but I do write as an 'insider', implicated in the conditions and contradictions that I try to analyse and transform.

THE MIDDLE CLASS IN SINGAPORE

The experience of 'social reality' in Singapore is tied to a socio-historical context, and perceptions of that context. The history of the island and its people is commonsensically understood as tracing its roots to a British colony, beginning with the arrival of mostly extremely poor immigrants. Singaporeans share a view that this began to be fundamentally changed in the early 1960s: economic policies and concomitant urbanisation processes have effected profound changes for the majority of the population,[4] with shifts from labour-intensive light manufacturing to high technology industries more recently. These transformations have included changes in housing type, job and career choices, higher wages, expanded educational achievements, ownership of household technologies, televisions, video cassette recorders, etc., ownership of stocks, real estate and an expanded access to leisure activities.[5] There are clear differences in terms of the distribution of the benefits that economic and social policies have produced. But there is also a common recognition of 'betterment': both the actual experience of it and, via social mobility, the continued expectation of its continuation in the future for almost every Singaporean. This generalised sense of progress is condensed in the everyday life use of the label 'middle class', a social category used by a majority of Singaporeans about themselves, both

individually and with reference to their families. The term also has been used, particularly by the ruling elite, to characterise Singaporean society as a whole.

My central preoccupation in this piece is this intersubjective use of the term 'middle class'. My basic assumption is that the appropriation of this label involves everyday life work, to ensure the continued production of upward mobility. Further, the production of upward mobility is understood and judged in terms of the consumption of 'better' goods, services and ideas than 'before'. This involves the expectation that children will do better than their parents. Thus Singaporeans who live in three-room public housing flats, five-room public housing flats, and private apartments in middle-class condominiums would all refer to themselves as middle class, although 'objectively' and subjectively there would be an instant recognition of the differences between these three sets of living arrangements. But these people also share experiences of mobility through the housing progression. The work of constantly upgrading one's home is tied to a complex of other work, including the expectation of better employment opportunities, wage increments and the like. Betterment is not just about expanding material goods. It can and has become a demand also for expanded political and general social rights.

Texts for the way of life of the middle classes are as diverse as their sources, their authors and their users. This accounts for both the high level of divergence within the parameters of the term 'middle class' and the possibility and plausibility of the choice of 'middle class' as a term of self-reference by a widely divergent group of people, often not even connected – and in oppositional tension to each other in terms of experience and politics. But these people are also similar in important respects. First, to be middle class is to have a vast arena of choices within which to continually attain/experience betterment. Second, to be middle class is to do the work of making the relevant choices from within this vast arena. It is not just a matter of making choices *per se*; the choices must add up to a complex whole. This is because, third, choices must be balanced by a realistic appraisal of what is possible, given the Singapore context. This is underscored by the notion that the wrong choices can cause the loss of upward momentum, the stuff of middle classness.

The everyday life problematic of being middle class is at the same time a political problematic. On the one hand, if the sense of being middle class is provided for and sustained, then the promise of modernity, the blueprint of governing parties worldwide, is achievable/achieved. On the other hand, if the sense of being middle class is thwarted, the

legitimacy of governing party rule riding on the modernisation covenant could begin to crumble. The problem from the perspective of the ruling elite is to ensure that the measurement and experience of mobility are in accordance with the kind and degree of mobility which the government constructs in response to its own political interests, and limited by what it can deliver to the people.

EXPANDING GOODS, EXPANDING IDEAS

At one level, the ever-increasing range and variety of goods available via global capitalist production processes allow a continuous sense of change for the better. In important ways, capitalist production, with its built-in obsolescence, produces a sense of progress to be accomplished more easily than otherwise. But who is to decide what goods must be attainable or attained to support a sense of being middle class? In Singapore, the expanded range of material goods is perceived as related to the political climate, even as gifts of the state to the people. Indeed, the state overtly prides itself on its provision of goods and services. The amorphous mass that identifies itself as middle class may well use indicators of mobility by referring to goods that the state may not be able to provide.

For example, two important elements of upward mobility in Singapore are the car and the 'better' residence, but both are becoming increasingly difficult to afford. The government nonetheless struggles to ensure a continuing sense of improvement for the populace. In the realm of housing, the sense of mobility until recently came about through the availability of better flats. In the present heated/over-heated property market, however, this has become difficult for some sections of Singapore's middle class. Thus, the government has undertaken to improve existing housing estates in an upgrading exercise by which one gains extra space, additional features, and even additional value on public housing apartments. Without having to find new accommodation, many Singaporeans can express betterment in living conditions in this way.

Pursuit of betterment also involves ideational choices, the potent idea of mobility as an increasing sense of control over one's life. In other words, choice could involve the claim to be able to provide and produce ideas about new ways of being middle class. The government must, therefore, deliver the promise of the texts by which ideational choice is defined or indeed delegitimise some of those discourses. Thus, if the middle class aspires to alternative voices in parliament, those alternative voices are created by the presence of non-partisan nominated members of parliament. Opposition politicians are shown to be mostly irrelevant if not downright unnecessary nuisances who obstruct proper governing/government in Singapore. Further, 'progress' must be read into some situations, while it is erased from other situations. Thus the debate about the relevance of 'Western' democracy for 'Asian' societies attempts to cast aspersions on certain kinds of democratic institutions, practices and ideas. In this way, what could be seen as taken-for-granted aspects of betterment can now be reread with greater suspicion: is this really what we want? Is this really betterment?

I have been arguing that the material and ideational choices that underpin the discourses of being middle class both legitimise and challenge the Singapore regime. It therefore has to curb the extent, pace and content of the expansion of alternatives. This is merely the battle – and one that involves possibly the most overt negotiations. The real war engages the form of dominant texts, in which the work of the middle class translates into the reproduction of a particular complex of middle-class life. As I shall show, the middle-class way of life is negotiated and reproduced with reference to shared notions about the limits of the possible. That is, even while modern technology and communications make the range, form and content of choices appear limitless, the limits of possibility are brought to bear upon the range of choices. Paradoxically, the limits of the possible – defined importantly in relation to the normal, the moral and the contextually relevant – enable/coerce the middle class to *choose* to limit those expanding ideational and material choices that come with being and doing this class.

FEAR OF FALLING

In contemporary Singapore, there are at least two potent sources of legitimate limits to 'choices'. First, there are shared notions of Singapore society *per se*, which frame the way choices must be made. I refer to these shared knowledges as the 'fear of falling'. Such fear is general, that is, not gender specific. Choices are framed with reference to certain limits, summarised as responsible familial and national participation – demands are framed by what is *morally* possible. This moral legitimation is crucial in framing social, economic and political demands. The limits of the possible act as a brake on claims by both individuals and groups, and include perceptions of state authoritarianism and forces larger than the state such as God/religion and 'tradition'/racial heritage. Second, there are two basic 'biological givens' that are assumed to define persons, 'race' and 'sex'. In this chapter, I am concentrating on sex-based limits and their relevance for women's lives in Singapore. These limits are given meaningful legitimations in what I shall refer to as the 'normal family' ideology dominant in Singapore today.

The demand for more variety is not simply tied to the consumption of an increasing range of items. Choices are part of a complex whole, reflecting a fear of losing what has been gained and should continue to be gained. This fear of falling makes for a particularly interesting combination of alliance and tension, in which middle-class aspirations and the regime's frames for those aspirations are worked out. One of the most powerful aspects of the fear of falling refers to the official version of Singapore's international standing. Within this discourse Singapore is commonly and commonsensically represented as a small island highly vulnerable to the exigencies of the outside world. Underscoring this is a siege mentality, a continuing fear that something might happen outside of Singapore's control which would destroy all that has been gained thus far. A second, related, issue is the received economic history of Singapore, which sees the secret of Singapore's success as due to the achievements and continuing expertise of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). This is closely tied to an acceptance of the PAP's free rein with one-party rule since Independence. Based on this reading of history, the government and the ruling party claim the authority to define the directions for the future as well. There are at least three sets of specific concerns about which the country must be continuously vigilant:

1 '*Westernisation*' The Singaporean/government notion of 'Western' choices refers to 'wrong' or 'bad' choices, which reflect what is wrong with developed countries today. These include values, attitudes and ideas, which summarily pit the individual and his/her concerns over and above societal concerns. Linked at once to particular material choices, certain ideas if left unchecked can and will bring with them problems of an undisciplined society with concomitant social problems, like illegitimate [sic] children, AIDs, increasing uses of illicit drugs and so forth. All these threaten the gains made thus far.
2 '*Welfarism*' What we can have today must be weighed against how much we must squirrel away for the future. The government sees itself as the strict head of the 'family of Singapore'. If it spares the rod, the children will ransack the candy store for more than they can afford, or more than is good for them. Thus the constant admonition that we cannot afford 'welfare'. This word, I would argue, is a catch-all term for increasing costs of living in Singapore, especially those tied to the recent privatisation of select public schools and all major hospitals and the increasing jumps in the costs of owning a home in contemporary Singapore. Fear of costs, which inhibits forward momentum, must be weighed against the fear of falling in the future. One must guard against such problems by saving.
3 *Political liberalism* One of the most potent fears of falling concerns itself with the need for the 'correct' kind of political party and government to lead the country forward. As well, the government must have a free rein to ensure that its expert planning and programmes are not hindered by a strong oppositional voice, which will oppose merely for the sake of opposition. That will produce political instability which will scare investors away. If the populace wants different/non-People's Action Party (PAP) voices, these are possible without opposition party membership in parliament through such schemes as nominated members of parliament.

'Westernisation', 'welfarism' and 'political liberalism' are discourses authorised by the ruling elite as checks on what could be a wider range of material and ideational choices. They are top-down impositions, not consensual 'ordinary' middle-class concerns shared with the government. But all three discourses have also been challenged in varying degrees, generating yet another, fourth, fear – that of the middle-class squeeze. Thus, the concerns with rising costs of living, a heated property market, the high costs of owning a car, let alone its maintenance, and education issues are closely tied to a growing sense that the government is restricting the forward momentum in some of these areas, and thus making the climb upwards more difficult.

Alongside the squeeze there is a sense of powerlessness about changing the situation, which relates to the fifth fear, the fear of government reprisals. There has been a growing sense that the government is responsible for unnecessary curbs on acceptable alternative views and emasculating the political potential of the middle class. This understanding acts to put a brake on ideational changes, giving the middle-class push a certain preoccupation with material gains.[6] Yet, despite the tensions that these fears create between the middle class and the regime, it is important to recognise that they share a siege mentality which forges an alliance between them. As I shall argue, the ideology of the 'normal' family, and the brakes it puts on aspirations, are powerful factors in embedding this siege mentality.

THE NORMAL FAMILY IDEOLOGY

The idea of the 'normal' family rests, first and foremost, on a dual sex, dual gender category, dominant in contemporary Singapore. This is widespread in political discourse and a taken-for-granted orientation

among large sections of the population. There is the shared notion that gender resides in the body, summarised in genitalia. 'Boy' or 'girl' invokes a range of 'normal', 'moral' measures by which the body so named is regulated. This regulation involves a contract, embodied in the discipline we engage in to accomplish being boy/man or girl/woman with respect to social notions and specificities. At the same time, tutelage over the body – overt policing – is legitimated. Through discipline, the ongoing body achieves its socially recognisable male and female genders. This general stance takes on a more specific form and content via the location of social bodies in corresponding socially recognisable spaces. Of prime concern here is the space and time which are recognisably 'middle class'. They give to the actors embedded in such space the self-awareness of their 'middle-class' position. The construction of this space and time involves reflexive and deliberate reference to a vast and notional complex of ideas, which – as mentioned – I refer to as the normal family ideology.

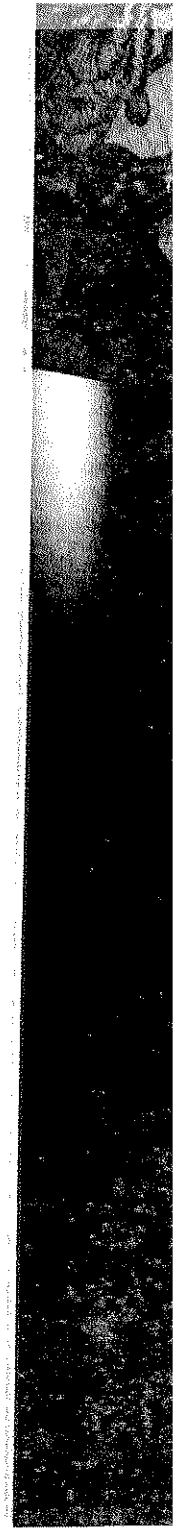
The normal patriarchal family ideology in Singapore arose, perhaps paradoxically, when women in the then incipient 'middle class' of the politically active 1950s clamoured for equal rights.[7] In doing so, they joined forces with a section of their middle-cum-upper class British rulers. Select aspects of the family were treated as especially problematic in terms of a largely colonial exposure to and reading of family lives. The custom of primary and secondary wives, named and understood as Chinese 'polygamy', disconcerted British legal administrators. In addition, the newly established voluntary Singapore Family Planning Association, run by English and English-educated welfare workers and medical personnel, noted the disturbing practice of women being married from as early as 10 years of age, continual pregnancies and the consequent overcrowding of homes and difficulties with housework. Women and therefore the family were read as being in danger.[8]

These readings fuelled the struggle for women's betterment by the middle class. Equal rights for women became a rallying call even for the PAP. One of their most important political documents of that time, *The Tasks Ahead. PAP's Five Year Plan 1959–1964*, included a section on 'Women in the New Singapore'.[9] Increasingly, mobility into the 'middle class' became identified with the production and consumption of a particular construct of the family, modelled as a social group comprising husband, wife and, preferably, two children. Prior to the late 1960s, such a unit was not the only norm for Singaporeans. Sections of the population were involved in secondary marriages, concubinage and larger household groupings of kin. As I have argued elsewhere (PuruShotam 1993: 3–4), families then and now are constructed, lived

in and experienced in a multiplicity of ways. Indeed, some of the pre-1960s 'families' contradicted the norms of heterosexuality and patriarchy, viz., the Fukien-derived practice of male homosexuality and male-male marriages, and the Canton-derived associations of women entering into lesbian marriages. Today, in the place of such myriad norms there exists a single dominant ideology of the normal family, which derives its legitimacy from the following claims:

1 The Singaporean (Chinese) family is rooted in Asia (China) – a claim to antiquity that is at once moral and moral also because 'racial'.[10]
2 This family is arranged with reference to an age- and gender-based authority and power structure.
3 While the family's assumed antiquity gives its ageism and sexism a certain powerful morality, the same ageism and sexism are accepted as having been excessive in some ways. Accordingly, there is the claim/assertion that modernity has tempered the original version of the family, particularly with regard to excesses that related to the subordinate position of women in the family. In this respect, while essentially Chinese in form, the texture of the family here is importantly Singaporean. Women are subordinate but liberated; their bound feet have been freed for a wider range of spaces that they can enter into both literally and figuratively; but they must also be cognisant of their status as women in a patriarchy.
4 Westernisation threatens the family, particularly with respect to the authority of elders as parents, and elders as males. Specific aspects of this threat include women's rights, particularly in the form of feminist extremism. This is often presented as a singular phenomenon, best captured in the oft-repeated media-imagined story of bra-burning women in the West.
5 The meaning of an individual's life relates to its embeddedness in the family. Accordingly, all lives unfold along a normal continuum. Girls will become young women who will marry, produce children and raise them. These are their central tasks. Boys will grow up and marry too, but their familial responsibility is as breadwinners. Therefore their major concern is to engage in the public world. They are also the natural heads of their families.

In sum, the 'normal family' is a contemporary invention whose dominance hides the fact of its social creation. Women's significant role in the reproduction of this ideology means that they must reproduce their own subordination. Indeed, the hegemonic position of the 'normal family' lies in its reification – that which women themselves construct is understood as existing prior to the constructors themselves.



The normal family ideology enables the continuing existence and reconstruction of the assumption of the natural rightness of a dual sex, dual gender relationship. In this one sex, the male, is 'naturally', 'normally' and 'morally' superior to the other. Also, as noted, the ideology almost ensures the protection of the family from the dangers of Westernisation/Western decadence. This notion prepares the way for everyday life work in which deliberations concentrate less on the sins of patriarchy than on its fragility (!) Thus, while modernity provides a means to betterment, that betterment is always subject to a need to safeguard the family both from the dangers of Westernisation and to uphold patriarchy. Limits are thereby placed, not least by women themselves, on what women can expect to ask, and be given, as citizens of their country. More importantly, the normal family ideology allows women to imagine themselves to be on a normal life trajectory, in which they must work to acquire membership as 'girl', 'young woman', 'married woman' and 'mother'. In doing this work a woman becomes of her own accord a key producer of middle-class life generally and of her husband's and children's middle-class life in particular. This moral binding between their everyday work and the better life means that women of the middle class are engaged daily both in the reconstruction of a middle-class way of life, by definition a better life, and their own subordination in it.

WOMEN'S REPRODUCTION OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS WAY OF LIFE

It is a taken-for-granted assumption both among the general population and the political elite that Singaporean women have come a long way. Celebrating this, the PAP's Women's Wing published two books on Singapore women in 1993.[11] The authors generally maintain that the position of Singapore women has been favourable, especially 'when we remember what it used to be in the 1960s' (Wong 1993: 11). Many women would agree. Indeed, in conversation 'middle-class' women here openly suggest that they are better off – they are the 'modern', liberated women. Revealingly, the 'liberation' refers not so much to an ideological stance, as to a recognition that the contemporary Singaporean woman now has access to an expanded range of choices. This specifically refers to a social and economic context, seeing this as fashioned for them by the Singapore government. As Aline Wong (1993: 11), chair of the Women's Wing and now Minister of State for Education and Senior Minister of State for Health notes: '[t]hat we [women] have arrived so far is due, in no small measure, to the economic and social policies of the government under the People's Action Party which has been the ruling party since Singapore's independence.'

At one level, it is difficult to gather together and name such a wide and varied range of expanding ideational and material choices for women. Thus, among the many and varied changes for the better are a host of seemingly unrelated phenomena: monogamous marriage involving romance and courtship and not arrangement by parents; educational and career opportunities; private homes with a kitchen and two or more bathrooms; access to interior design experts and beautiful homes; disciplined bodies sheathed in the latest imported designer wear with cosmetics, costume jewellery and hair styles to match; magazines and books written specifically for women – the almost endless list is evidence of how far Singapore women have come.

At another level, there is something importantly singular about these diverse phenomena. They comprise choices that spell first, 'woman' as a general social construct and, second, 'woman' as a specifically middle-class construct. In both instances, further, the experience of middle class and middle-class betterment is linked to a woman's entry into and situation within the family of marriage and procreation. To enter into marriage is to make oneself eligible: expanded material and ideational choices are, along these lines, most bountiful. To take just one example, a large range of locally published and eagerly read magazines for women sell a middle-class way of life via the products they advertise in their glossy pages and the ideas they present in their articles. These products and ideas involve men-as-experts pronouncing about female bodies and female minds. After all it is heterosexual eligibility that one must strive for, given the normal family. My favourite love-to-hate 'advice' article of this kind was published in *Go* (November 1990: 78). In that issue's cover story, titled *'Our Bodies. The Bits the Singapore Man Likes Best'*, two men reveal:

> What are the parts of the female body that makes [sic] their hearts beat faster? Not surprisingly, a clear eighty per cent expressed a fondness for breasts. But unlike their Western counterpart, prone to drool over the Dolly Partons of this world, the Singapore man prefers proportions to size [sic].

This article is presented as an example not so much of social control as of a version of liberation. Such commentaries are taken as signs of 'frank' and honest discussion, with open references to women's 'sexuality'. Such openness would not have been possible in the 'old-fashioned' past. Women are free to hear men talk of them and thus learn from that talk about what men want, so they can therefore perform better as 'woman'.

The material and ideational are not only available but are consumed in large measure, figuratively and literally. The range of means by which women can 'modernise' their bodies has grown astoundingly. Being middle class has meant seeing the proliferation of experts that one can avail of to redo the body; including beauticians, dietitians and cosmetic surgeons. A *Sunday Times* news report (13 June 1993) proudly announced that Singapore women today 'are bigger, going by their bras':

> This indicates that Singapore women are not only getting bigger built but better developed too' said Mr Lam (spokesperson for Japanese bra manufacturer, Wacoal Singapore) . . . . (T)wo Minister of Health nutritionists said the findings could be attributed to better nutritional intake in recent years.

Not surprisingly, as one Singaporean fashion designer commented, 'over the last decade customers (have become) more confident of their fashion sense and their bodies' (as quoted in the *Straits Times* 24 November 1993). She also noted that bodies had become thinner. This thinner but bigger-busted and constantly modernising body of the single woman in particular is also placed in a space that she can colour with the romance which is the 'modern' way to find a husband. A woman's sexuality is expressed primarily in her appearance and seen as legitimate because it brings with it the potential to enter into a heterosexual marriage and to produce children. Indeed, much of the means to a middle-class way of life involves being wife and husband.

Take for instance ownership of an apartment, one of the most sought after embellishments of 'class' mobility in Singapore. An estimated 86 per cent of the resident population live in public housing, Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats (Housing and Development Board 1993/4: 70). One of the criteria for eligibility to own such flats is the 'family formation rule': this states that unless a woman is 40 years old or more, or a man is 50 years old or more, s/he will not be 'eligible to rent or purchase a HDB flat without having to form [sic] a family nucleus' (Wong and Yeh 1985: 246). This is because:

> [t]he HDB operates on the general principle that a family unit is in more need of housing than an unmarried individual. At the same time, for many social and practical reasons, it would wish to discourage individuals, whether young or old, to [sic] live on their own . . . . [T]he HDB also actively promotes the extended family as an institution through several specially formulated housing schemes . . . introduced in the seventies and eighties . . . (such as) . . . Reside Near Parents/Married Children Scheme . . . and the Multi-Tier Family Housing Scheme.
>
> (ibid.: 252)

The need for a family nucleus comprising a man and his wife was explicitly spelled out in a 1994 National Day Rally Speech by the Prime Minister. He lamented the fact that unmarried mothers by virtue of being mothers were eligible for public housing: 'This rule implicitly accepts unmarried motherhood as a respectable part of our society. This is wrong. By removing the stigma, we may encourage more women to have children without getting married,' (as quoted in the *Straits Times* 22 August 1994). From then on such women would be denied the right to buy public flats directly from the HDB, but could only obtain them from the resale market at a substantially inflated price.

Owning an apartment is the entry point for yet another crucial aspect of middle-class everyday life. Doing up a home provides one of the most important ways of doing middle-class culture. The furnishing market in Singapore is estimated to be worth US$1.4 billion a year (*Asia Magazine* 1995: 12). Translate this into a timetable involving window shopping, gazing at books on interior decoration, actual buying, actual decorating involving hours with a decorator, and maintenance of a set middle-class standard of cleanliness and presentability. There is a pleasurably endless variety of work involved in dressing up the home in which a woman will reign, subordinate only to her husband. It is also a means to present a social self and a family that has a recognisably middle-class way of life.

In these homes too, women become mothers of two to three well-spaced out children. As mothers they take on added responsibilities. They must ensure that their children are properly socialised. Upward social mobility for the family will be continued through them. Women's choices have greatly expanded here too. There is, for example, a vast array of paraphernalia and a proliferation of relevant expertise by which they can ensure that their babies will have a head start in life. They work hard to find and consume material like *How to teach your baby to think*, or read, or do maths, or have encyclopedic knowledge. Such books are often shelved with other child care books in the section entitled 'of interest to women' or 'for women'. If they are sorted under the shelf titled 'child care', then these shelves are located next to 'women' shelves, such as 'health and women', 'cookery', or just 'women'. Women also arrange their child's enrolment in the growing numbers of speech and drama school courses which promise access to English, the language of mobility, as spoken by the presumably more inherently

qualified teachers from the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Drama and other schools that 'improve' the minds and bodies of children are filled with women bringing children in for their classes and waiting until the hour is up to ferry them home or to another class.

Much of the work that women do, then, creates a complex way of life that can be and is loosely recognised as middle class. This work not only creates middle-class life for themselves, but also ensures its accomplishment for men and children, in important ways. The work is clearly burdensome, given that middle classness for women also involves their being 'working mothers'. The multiple careers imposed on women obviously disturb illusions about middle-class life as a wholly attractive option. The related burdens have led women to question the way of life that they have undertaken. Yet there is a powerful Singaporean aspect of this that mitigates the onerousness of the middle-class family way of life. Upward social mobility still holds out real promise for the transfer of the tedious, mundane and boring tasks that are part of the less rewarding aspects of doing the middle-class family to first, labour- and time-saving household technologies and, second, to other women.[12] These other women include full-time foreign domestic maids, brought in from the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and Burma.[13] One may not have such a maid, but to be of the middle class means that one can aspire to have such help in the future. The problem with the middle-class way of life, then, is not so much that it is a problem in and of itself; rather, it is a reflection of one's lower place in that same class: future mobility will iron out the wrinkles.

SOCIALLY RELEVANT FEMINIST ALTERNATIVES

I have already mentioned that the middle-class way of life that women reproduce with reference to the normal family ideology is both their betterment and their imprisonment. The experience and recognition of imprisonment, however, involve interpretive work and therefore a body of social knowledge which can give social meaning to it. Are the frustrations and difficulties of being 'woman' merely the fate of woman, or are they a consequence of actions that can be challenged and changed? Middle-class education and other resources have allowed Singapore women access to texts that can provide another way of understanding the middle-class family way of life, and choices about how to modify that way of life. The most politically powerful body of such texts can be loosely grouped together as 'feminist alternatives'. As with all social knowledges, available texts are dormant until called up and used to interpret and construct social realities. Feminist alternatives are no

different. Given the normal family ideology in particular, feminist alternatives can be treated as interesting but not very relevant aspects of middle-class perspectives. They are not very real or accomplishable, however, especially in unquestionably patriarchal contexts. Further, 'everyday life' involves the doing of the mundanely normal. The unquestioned normal needs to be breached.

At this point I should like to explore these complexities by outlining three characteristic orientations that middle-class women can and do take in negotiating life constructs for themselves and others: the 'modern not feminist' perspective (often summarised in statements like, 'I am liberated/modern but not feminist'); the moderate feminist perspective (which is clarified by the statement that, 'We are *Asian feminists*'), and the radical feminist perspective (a designation that some Asian feminists give to certain views that they are nervous about). The terms 'modern/liberated', 'moderate' and 'radical' are derived really from their occurrence in everyday life discourse and are being used here strictly with reference to their more local meanings.[14] I shall look at these three orientations more closely below, but it is important to stress that they are not meant to be treated as exclusive categories of women within the middle class. Any one person can hold one, two or all of these sets of views. Thus, one can be 'modern' about some things, but not 'feminist'; moderately 'feminist' in relation to some others; and radically feminist about others. For example, a woman may not question her own hiring of a foreign domestic maid using strictly contractual terms of employment. Yet in another situation she may bemoan the difference between women's and men's pay.

Generally, the combination of these attitudes, contradictory or otherwise, varies in relation to the person's location in a trajectory of social time, marked by location within or outside of a marriage, and the experiences within it. Thus women who have had a marked feminist-based repugnance against the foreign domestic maid scheme have shelved this and gone on to use the scheme after they themselves become mothers. Feminist texts then become relevant and useful, even if notionally and in an unquestioning manner, when they correspond in some important ways to the normal family-embedded trajectory that a woman occupies at different points in her life. These personal life experiences shape the way the different texts are interwoven into a perspective which can change from moment to moment. Such personal life experiences are at once social too, for, as I have argued, the paradigm of the normal family and the life trajectory of a woman embedded within it ensure a certain shared knowledge by which life is reconstructed. The majority of women in Singapore, sooner or later, will make their way out from their

family of origin into a family of procreation of their own by a heterosexual marriage. This process itself embeds them in a materially and ideationally expressed ideological meaningfulness.

'Modern' orientation draws unquestioningly from the dominant family ideology. Such an orientation arises from a context in which the experience of the middle-class way of life is perceived as unproblematic for the most part. There is little sense of gender-based discontent within the dominant texts of middle-class modernity. The perception is that women have advanced and will continue to do so. Equality has happened and will continue to happen. Further, equality is understood in given gender terms – it is an equality based on the principle of complementarity, which gives women a secondary place next to men.

Such an orientation appears to have been the socially dominant one among Singaporean women till as late as the early 1980s. Through the 1960s up to this time middle classness was achieved fairly easily, and came to be seen as a gift of the government, making the work of women in this respect invisible. A rude social awakening came in early 1983. On 14 August 1983 the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, gave a National Day Rally speech which has resonated down to the present. Lee began this speech by recounting the success story of Singapore since 1959. On the one hand, the story was a celebration of Singapore's economic achievements: since 1959, against great odds, Lee and his government had wrested immense progress for Singapore society economically and (thereby) socially; on the other hand, the story was given a new twist. The very crucial changes that this progress brought about, which underscored the economic and social mobility of women in Singapore, was, according to him, regrettable in some important respects:

> Our most valuable asset is in the ability of our people. Yet we are frittering away this asset through unintended consequences of changes in our education policy and equal career opportunities for women. This has affected their traditional role as mothers. It is too late for us to reverse our policies and have our women go back to their primary role as mothers, the creators and protectors of the next generation. Our women will not stand for it. And anyway they have already become too important a factor in the economy. Therefore we must amend our policies, and try to reshape our demographic configuration so that our better-educated women will have more children to be adequately represented in the next generation . . . . They need incentives not disincentives.[15]

Lee was here regretting changes in education and work opportunities for women – two of the most significant of the expanding choices that

marked being and doing middle class. Not surprisingly, it shook women up – and continues to do so, for time proved that Lee's speech heralded a long new moment for Singaporean women: new only because the patriarchal bases of Singaporean society were made clear, and that somewhat ironically set women thinking about them more critically. Thus Lee set in motion a train of speeches and policies pertinent to women in Singapore society which continues today. Lee is now senior minister in Goh Chok Tong's cabinet. But the present Prime Minister has made it clear that his position on women and the family largely perpetuates the concerns expressed by his predecessor:

> Singaporeans living in HDB flats have seen big improvements in their standard of living. Aside from owning more luxury consumer items like hi-fi sets, 37,000 HDB homes have (full-time foreign) domestic maids, with 4,000 of the maids in three-room HDB flats. And each year, almost one in two HDB families have some members who go abroad for holidays . . . Our institutions and basic policies are in place to sustain high economic growth. But if we lose our traditional values, our family strength and cohesion, we will lose our vibrancy and decline.
>
> (Quoted in *Business Times* 22 August 1994)

Like Lee, Goh sees the threat to traditional values contained within the normal family as deriving from the changes in women's position and the demands they can now make. The fundamental problem – the one that allows women to live alone, to treat divorce as acceptable and to not bear (enough) children, is seen to be due to the challenges to patriarchy that changes in women's status have unwittingly brought about. Goh noted that women must accept that they live in a patriarchal society and should realise that it is 'not possible nor is it wise to have total sex equality in all areas' (Goh 1993: 29). To augment this, the government will introduce legal and administrative rules that will block women from certain kinds of gains, such that they will have access to certain 'rights, benefits and privileges' only through 'the head of the family, so that *he* can enforce the obligations and responsibilities of family members' (Goh Chok Tong, as quoted in the *Straits Times* August 22 1994, emphasis mine).

From the very start, women recognised the threat in all these statements, a threat that drew them towards feminist knowledges and made feminisms potentially more relevant in their lives. Suddenly middle-class women in Singapore awoke to a sense of fear that continuing middle-class betterment could be thwarted by the very source bringing them what they saw as the good and modern life. The modern viewpoint

was not as easy to hold on to as before. Thus, the shock, dismay and anger that followed Lee's first speech came especially strongly from the ranks of professional middle-class women, who decided to found the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). Registered in 1985, this was the first feminist organisation to arise since the virtual disappearance of women activists from the political scene in the early 1960s. Today AWARE boasts close to 700 members, who are middle class both 'objectively' and subjectively. Individuals and other middle-class women's professional and social organisations, particularly under the auspices of their umbrella body, the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (ORGANISATIONS), also began to engage in debates about the question of women's place in Singapore. In all these deliberations women entered into a conscious relationship with the examination, selection, re-production or rejection of notional and specific knowledges, which they referred to as 'feminist'.

Yet there was something enigmatic in this turn of events. First, feminist debates obviously did not take place in a vacuum. Given the powerful position of the normal family ideology, deliberations on feminisms became occasions to wed feminist alternatives with ideas and elements from the ideology of family. In their search for texts to counter the ruling elite's position about women's place, middle-class women were struggling to retain a middle-class way of life resting on this family ideology. Feminist questioning did not come from a questioning of the middle class itself. Instead it came in response to the stated regrets of a respected leader considered to be one of those directly responsible for the betterment of middle-class Singapore women. Feminism was being used, in an important way, to support a way of life that was at once in contradiction with some of its tenets.

Second, this rather strange marriage between feminist knowledge and a patriarchal family orientation did give women a political voice in a society in which political voices were restrained, to say the least, by the fear of reprisals against anything resembling oppositional politics. As I shall show below, the negotiations between the ruling elite and women centred around a shared language, in which both appeal to the texts pertinent to fears of falling and the normal family ideology. Women's use of these texts is of strategic importance, although it is not used as mere strategy. Herein lies the crux of the problem. Texts can be used to reread women's position. Claims made about women within them are seemingly accepted but also used to pressure creatively for change.

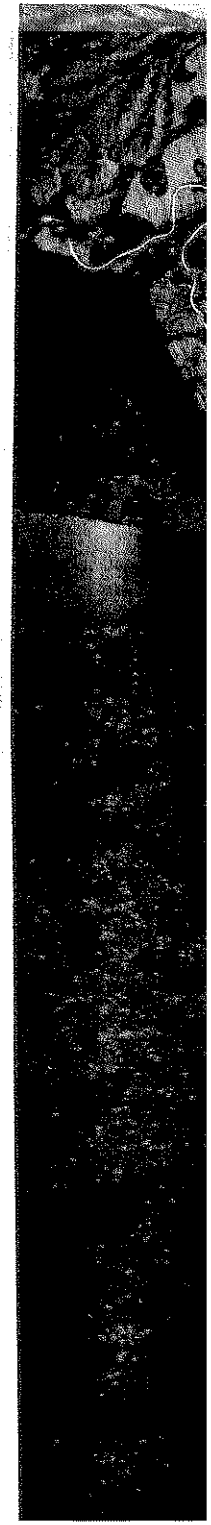
A further, third, complication is that the newly created space for negotiations between middle-class women and the ruling elite was in itself a middle-class desideratum. These were heady times in Singapore:

women and their organisations were heralded as the newly emerging civic society. Women's organisations and their leaders became symbols of yet another aspect of middle classness. This symbolism was underscored by the attention the government paid to AWARE in particular. But the negotiations demanded the use of a language that the ruling elite would be willing to negotiate in, a language that called for both sides to attend to the powerful limits that the normal family imposed, supposedly, for the good of the nation and hence women too. Additionally, women's new-found organisational vigour was to be protected for fear that the organisations might be deregistered if women in these organisations breached the unspoken terms by which negotiations with the ruling elite are possible.

As a corollary, a body of knowledges that was, and is, labelled moderate feminism was constructed and used in the language of women who could legitimate its rightful place in contemporary Singapore. 'Moderate feminist' views acknowledge their reliance on feminist texts to critique various instances of inequality within the structures of patriarchal family ideologies and patriarchal families, but they are also highly mindful of 'Asian' concerns, which moderate legitimate limits on what is normally and morally possible for women in Singapore. Clearly there is a central tension here. Asian-ness is importantly located in the normal family, the core of which is patriarchal. Patriarchal families, in which men are heads of household, refer, implicitly at least, to a patriarchal society in which the members of the male ruling elite are heads of state in like manner. Moderate feminism then is selective feminism in which certain ideas and ideologies cannot be publicly admitted. In this way middle-class women's politics arises and takes shape within a constantly shifting continuum of compliance with and resistance to patriarchal ideologies and practices. To illustrate some of the implications of this I shall look at the example of the unequal medical benefits for women in the civil service, not least because this issue was one of the few issues that has provoked strong reactions from middle-class women and women's organisations in recent times.

THE MODERATE FEMINIST ORIENTATION: BETWEEN COMPLIANCE AND RESISTANCE

In spite of the principle of equal pay for equal work adopted in 1966, female civil servants are not entitled to the same medical benefits as their male counterparts unless they are widowed, divorced or separated. In the main, medical benefits for male civil servants extend to a male employee's wife and children, while only the individual female worker



is covered. Although this situation had existed for a long time it only surfaced for the first time as a public issue when a former male member of parliament, Ong Leong Boon, raised it in 1976. It surfaced again in 1986 when another, female, member of parliament, Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, appealed for a change to this ruling. Finance Minister Hu, however, claimed that the economy was not performing satisfactorily enough for an extension to be possible at this time (*Straits Times* 13 February 1994).

When Yu-Foo asked for reconsideration of the issue in early 1993, Hu said that the scheme 'may see a change' in the latter part of the year (*Straits Times* 12 March 1993). Hopes were so high that at least one large statutory employer proceeded to prepare the grounds for extending similar medical coverage for spouses and children of its female employees in time for the next Budget announcements. Instead, to the shocked dismay of many, Hu announced in November 1993 that women would not be give similar coverage, although cost was not an issue at all. The increase in medical subsidy would amount to $8.1 million, just 0.4 per cent of the payroll, if the coverage was extended. The rationale was loudly and clearly about framing women's rights *vis-à-vis* the patriarchal family, as Hu made clear:

> It is the husband's responsibility to look after the family's needs, including their medical needs. This is how our society is structured. It would be unwise to tamper with this structure.
>
> (*Strait Times* 12 November 1993)

Clearly there were two issues here: the issue of medical benefits *per se* and the issue of women's place in the family and society. Reactions from the women's organisations and women activists in these organisations appear to have understood this.

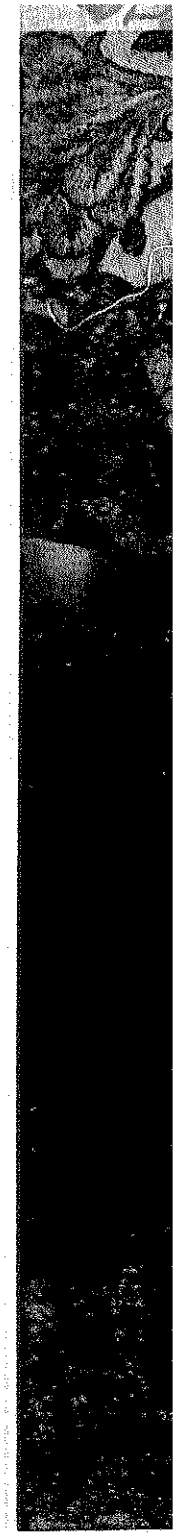
In these debates there is a tendency to stay close to concrete concerns rather than the larger issues within which they are embedded. A statement and/or an announcement of incentives and, more so, disincentives, made by the ruling elite, *may* provoke a reaction. The issue of limited medical coverage for female civil servants saw one of the most acrimonious reactions in recent decades. But when Dr Richard Hu, the Finance Minister, introduced tax rebates in the 1987 and 1989 National Budgets to encourage women to have children earlier and to have more children, they were barely noticed. He had announced that $20,000 rebates would be offered to encourage parents to have a third and fourth child (*Straits Times* 3 August 1990). Another set of rebates were given in 1990, when Hu announced that 'rebates of $20,000, $15,000, $10,000 and $5 000 were to be given to mothers who deliver a second baby before they turn

28, 29, 30 and 31 years of age respectively' (*Business Times* 7 March 1990). Thus, 10,500 women were expected to benefit (sic) from these rebates in the 1991 Year of Assessment alone. Significantly, tax rebates did not bring forth much public protest, despite the apparent patriarchal objectification of women.

The protests that may follow particular concerns involve the use of one or more of the following approaches:

1 Letters are written by individual women and men, and/or representatives of women's organisations, to the local newspapers.
2 Questions and criticism are raised in parliament in the main by nominated member of parliament (NMP) Khanwaljit Soin, to whom I shall refer later. Soin arrived on the scene in 1992, when she was president of AWARE. She began her term with the firm public declaration that she was here to represent women; they were her constituency.
3 Less frequently, public forums are organised by AWARE, ORGANISATIONS (Singapore Council of Women's Organisations) and the National University of Singapore Society.
4 Sometimes, representations are made to the relevant Ministries behind closed doors. These may take the form of arguing against the policy *per se*, or arguing for relaxation of the ruling in relation to a special case.
5 Private conversations provide another means of airing frustration at the government's latest salvo against women.
6 I should also note a suggestion that appears to have first come up in a forum on 'Towards Equal Benefits', organised by ORGANISATIONS in December 1994, which encouraged women to 'speak up more. Talk to our MPs. We shouldn't be silenced' (*Straits Times* 13 December 1994). It does not seem to have been taken up in any prominent way, however. All six ways of protest importantly focus attention on the ruling elite, confirming that social change is the prerogative of the male elite and not the direct and powerful work that women can and could do on and for themselves. Consequently, energies are directed at berating the authorities, perhaps mocking them and ultimately appealing to them. The powerful programme of consciousness-raising which would empower women, both numerically and ideologically, is almost completely ignored.

The strength of the medical benefits protests is revealed by the variety of interests united by the issue. These included PAP party stalwart and MP Yu-Foo, columnists of the *Straits Times*, who normally take pains to explain the government's position on many other issues, voices



of husbands and fathers protesting that their wives and daughters should not be discriminated against as they were part of the general workforce, and AWARE and ORGANISATIONS. Private debates were complemented by Soin's statements in Parliament, while more than the usual number of letters were published in the press. ORGANISATIONS organised a well-attended forum, 'Towards Equal Benefits', at which many took to the floor to voice their discontent. This was a splendid but, alas, brief time. The diversity of women and women's orientations that it brought together did not last. Further, the moment that enabled patriarchy itself to be seriously questioned very quickly narrowed back to concern with winning the State's patronage. This is best summarised in the words of one of the most active women of the time of the medical benefits clamour, Anamah Tan, President of ORGANISATIONS:

> Enough of confronting the policy-makers in public. We also know that if you go around beating your breast, you are not going to get anywhere. It's better to *present your facts in a reasoned and mature way* and doing this behind closed doors might *give politicians a chance to make a U-turn, if they want to.*
>
> (Quoted in *Straits Times* 13 February 1994: my italics)

The powerful moderate feminist orientation to the issue was legitimated by the ruling elite's apparently conciliatory tone, even if that tone was glazed with paternal sternness. Goh Chok Tong has made it very clear that he and his government are more than prepared to help women get ahead, even enjoy 'equal' status at home and in the country at large. He himself has duly noted, time and again, that the government's stance towards women has little to do with its attitude to women *per se*. Its real concern is with 'big national problems' that inevitably involve women (Goh Chok Tong 1993: 32). The message is simply that women's demands are acceptable and to be expected – and should be catered to. If and when they are not, it is *not* a matter of a stance against women, but a stance in aid of the family, given the modern forces that work against this almost sacred institution. The example of the 'Western family' as the typically 'broken family' is warning enough, according to the mostly male polity. As Prime Minister Goh put it, after a National Day Rally speech,

> It is only a small group of women in Singapore who thought that the [National Day Rally] speech [which reiterated the government's position on women's subordinate status to men] was anti-woman. They are wrong. It is not anti-woman. I mean, how can we be anti-woman in our values? We are pro-family.
>
> (Goh Chok Tong, quoted in *Straits Times* August 22 1994)

A host of supportive policies and statements suggest that it is not the government's intention to block women's advancement in spite of its fundamental beliefs about gender. Chief among these policy areas are the job opportunities they are seen to be providing for women. Here the reader should recall Prime Minister Lee's regret in 1983 that it is too late for the government to expect women to leave the workforce and return home full-time, a regret which acknowledges capitalist demands in the labour force. Middle-class women are both confident and secure that this cannot ever change. Indeed, their gainful employment is justified by the family's 'middle-class' lifestyle, which they help achieve. This includes the highly important contribution to the mortgage of the very house/apartment, whether HDB or private, in which their families live. The perceived need for women in the workforce has also meant that, from time to time, the patriarchal polity makes statements which admonish men to be more equal partners in the home, especially when a call for more women to enter the labour force is made. In the main, this means that they are to help women out in housework, child care and cooking. This appeal to men has come from as high up as the Prime Minister and has been taken up by a number of other male ministers as well.

The most important proof of willingness to expand avenues for women is possibly the incorporation of women into Parliament and even in the Cabinet. Since the late 1950s, women had more or less disappeared from the political scene. This absence was not socially recognised till as late as 1984, when three women from the professional 'middle class' were 'hand-picked by the PAP to stand for election to Parliament' (Wang Look Fung and Nancy Teo 1993: 291). Today, slightly more than a decade later, there are two elected and two nominated female members of parliament. As well, for the first time a woman Aline Wong, who was mentioned above, has been appointed to the cabinet, although not as a fully-fledged minister, but as Senior Minister of State for Education and Health. Further proof of dispensation is to be found in the presence in parliament of NMP Khanwaljit Soin. Despite her strong pro-women stand both inside and outside Parliament, Soin was renominated by the cabinet for her second, current, term in parliament. Moreover, Goh has supported Soin's requests for parliament to include more women amongst its members. Graciously and generously, considering both the long absence of women in parliament as well as the publicised reluctance of women to enter politics, Goh promised to see to it that there would be six women in Parliament, double the number at the time he made this promise, by 1996 (*Straits Times* 14 June 1993). He did, however, note that:

> It's a very demanding job. *Even for a man* . . . it's difficult. For the woman there is the home to look after too. Like it or not, in Singapore, we expect the women to play a bigger role in the home.
>
> (Prime Minister Goh quoted in *Business Times* 14 June 1993)

The position of many prominent women activists again demonstrated that the ruling elite and many middle-class women shared the language of the normal family ideology and its inherent texts about the real character of women being distinctive. For instance, amid the furore over the Government's announcement regarding the continuation of unequal medical benefits for women civil servants, Claire Chiang, then president of AWARE, is reported to have said, with reference to the need for women to represent themselves politically, 'I just don't feel that fire in the belly' (quoted in the *Straits Times*, 11 December 1993). At this same time, the president of ORGANISATIONS, Anamah Tan explained:

> Politics is not foremost in the woman's mind. Foremost is which tutor to get for her daughter, what class to send her to, ballet or piano, or both? You ask them if they want to go into politics, they'll ask you, 'Where got time'?'
>
> (*Straits Times*, 11 December 1993)

In the same vein, almost no one argued with Yu-Foo when, speaking at the first ASEAN Women Leaders Forum in 1994, she claimed that Singapore women stay out of politics by choice, because they care more about the family than their own advancement. Such commentaries on the question of women in politics are occurring in a context in which men too are reluctant to enter politics. Thus in recent years the government has continuously referred to the problem of getting 'talented' 'persons' (read mainly men) into politics and the cabinet. The lack of interested males, in contrast, has been explained as arising from the financial sacrifices men must make in the transition from life as chief executive officers to that of civil servants. Consequently, ministerial salaries have been raised substantially – in an effort to get the good *men* into politics.

This brings us to the perhaps the most crucial point about gender and the 'middle class' in Singapore. The limits that the government insists on work not only because it wields the stick with the carrot, but because they make sense to women in contemporary Singapore. The enduring subtexts about women's subordination are read tantalisingly as if the government is actually ambiguous about women. There is a sense of negotiability. Women can and do question inequalities – with specific reference to specific statements. The focus of their attention is the male polity, which sometimes appears very reasonable – especially when

they give in to women's demands, as with the demand for political representation in parliament. Each win is a powerful example that you can, and must, negotiate. It also shows how to negotiate with the ruling elite. This puts a certain onus on women's negotiations among themselves: much time is spent on reforming their own strategies, reformulating their feminist knowledges and related language. Their efforts at moderating alternative knowledges with reference to the normal family and fears of falling are made all the more powerful by the ambivalent stance of the ruling elite on women. This has given to the moderate feminist orientation a certain smugness, making it the most overt and dominant one in Singaporean women's politics today.

But there is still the real presence of that feminist orientation that is described even by women who hold it as radical feminism. This is supposedly non-Asian, and by that definition, pro-Western. Where does this fit in the context of contemporary Singapore? Is this where the pressures for real changes for women could come from?

RADICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FAMILY

As mentioned earlier, the term 'radical feminist' is being used here in its specifically Singaporean meaning, which is attached to and comes from the notion of Asian feminism. This sees the world as divided into two spheres of influence in which Western ideas compete with, challenge and could even destroy Asian ideas. This is not unlike the ruling elite's conceptualisation of 'Westernisation' as one of the processes that Singaporeans must guard against if all that we have won for ourselves is not to be lost. It is noteworthy that the notion 'Asian' derives its meaning not so much from the idea of what is Asian but from what is not-Asian (cf. Chapter 4). Thus Asianness becomes the stick to knock down certain ideas which are perceived to question dominant taken-for-granted ideas. Asianness is obvious, commonsensically understood – it needs no explanation.

One of the most powerful condensations of this body of Asianness refers, as I have shown, to the normal family ideology. In this way, radical perspectives themselves are almost doomed from the start, because they admit to being radical in the sense that they are not Asian. The language then borrows from the dominant text. It persists in reifying the normal family, failing to question the contemporary and constructed character of the normal family. Instead, the normal family as a modern invention providing a powerful means of disciplining women is reified as if it were the 'real' cultural heritage. The radical critique assumes that the ideology of the normal family is that of a truly Asian family: to reject

the family is then to reject Asian culture. The more potent critique, the deconstruction of the family, is not available. This limits the radical position in the Singapore context, for both the family and Asianness are put on the stand. The argument is then couched in terms of what is wrong with us as Asians. It highlights the male chauvinism of Asian men in general, Asian husbands and Asian family practices. Their difference from those in the West becomes the basis of discourse. This division, moreover, gives strength to the notion that the Western family is different from the Asian family, undergirding the commonly held notion that Western family life is breaking down precisely because of its failure to be like the Asian patriarchal family. This removes the possibility of thinking about universal features of patriarchal families. In addition, by accepting the normal family ideology as the only Asian way of doing the family, the radical position fails to discover and/magnify the many choices about family which Asian cultures and Asian histories offer women that might run counter to dominant ideology. These include such examples as the institutionalised Cantonese practice of sisterhoods: these developed into a tradition amongst some women as an alternative way of doing the family, with or without marriage as an adjacent institution (PuruShotam 1993: 3–4).

Bearing this in mind, I would like to turn now to what I would argue are the most public radical statements about gender and the middle-class way of life, the works of Singaporean women playwrights, particularly Eleanor Wong and Ovidia Yu. Both Wong and Yu have struggled admirably to place the voices of the less visible views of women's plight on stage. Both, though, are also not yet 'mad' (i.e. 'lunatic') enough: their women, even at their most critical, cannot and do not manage to free themselves from the reins of the normal family. I have discussed this theme of gender in Singapore theatre elsewhere (PuruShotam 1995: 9–10), from which the following descriptions and arguments are derived.

Wong's *Mergers and Accusations* traces the relationship between Ellen Toh, a young, successful lesbian lawyer and a man, Jonathan Chin, also young, successful and a lawyer. The two end up marrying, have a child, and reverse gender roles: Jonathan stays at home as full-time 'mother' and 'housewife'. In a very crucial sense, Ellen and Jonathan play it strictly by the rules of gendered life trajectories. We are almost warned of this by Jonathan's careless response to Ellen's confession as a closet lesbian. Jonathan hears, but clearly does not listen. And he is not the only one who does not seem to reflect on crucial aspects of gender and gender relations that lesbianism – as an affront to 'normality', marked by Ellen's insistence on remaining in the closet,

throughout the play – could have offered. The marriage and life after it become very close to the normal gendered way of doing family. First, the sequences that are expected to occur in a certain order are adhered to: marriage before children; postponement of career because of mothering; returning to work after the child's babyhood. Second, the trajectory is put into play without much thought to it, with the same unquestioning stance that makes it a seen-but-unnoticed backdrop in most everyday lives. This is especially marked because of Ellen's willingness to marry and then provide Jonathan with a baby. Yet she never expresses a wish to have a child. So what was in it for her? Indeed, at the beginning of the play she dismisses Jonathan's interest in children with a distinctly unmaternal: 'They all remind me of fish at that age.' Third, the sequences leave the related membership categories associated with them intact in the most meaningful way. This is why we have referred earlier to Jonathan as 'mother' and 'housewife'. Because Jonathan is precisely like a mother and housewife, his gender as male recedes and the gender behind mothering and housework takes over. Ellen is the financial provider, living like a man in the world that Jonathan makes for her at home. She even uses the home like men would: in and out as she pleases, spending hardly any time with her child Sam or Jonathan. And Jonathan complains as the stereotypical neglected wife might be expected to complain.

> *Jon*: So why didn't you call earlier? Weren't we supposed to have dinner together tonight? Sam wanted to show you her latest masterpiece.
> *Ellen*: I said we would – if I could get away.
> *Jon*: And you couldn't. Why am I surprised?
> *Ellen*: I'm really sorry. Maybe tomorrow night. . . . You and Sam come first.
> *Jon*: After work.
> *Ellen*: If you're in one of your moods, I'd rather not discuss this.
> *Jon*: Sorry. It's just been a bitch of a day. Sam's stomach started acting up again and the clinic was a madhouse. Took us two hours to see the doctor. Which made me miss the plumber so the bathroom's still flooded.

To compound matters, the treatment of mothering and housework is clearly patriarchal in orientation. On the one hand, Wong's Jonathan slips in where Ellen would otherwise have been. She refuses a job that is quickly and easily filled: Jonathan just does what other women *struggle* to do. The fact that housework and mothering is work, and like work in a legal firm, requires skills and training that women are put through

throughout their lives is dismissed. This is reflective of Western feminism in the 1960s. The world of women is not examined in terms of the meanings and experiences within it. Moreover, this world is to be judged by the standards of the real world, in this case the law firm and the legal world that Jonathan used to share with Ellen. Indeed, both Ellen and Jonathan strongly support the necessity for the world to be peopled by patriarchal constructions of 'wife' and 'mother'. Ellen refuses marriage, at the beginning, not only because she is a lesbian, but even more so because marriage would mean demands on her as a wife and mother. Jonathan accepts this position, and so agrees to be that wife and mother in their marriage.

> *Jon*: I'll quit to look after the baby.
> *Ellen*: You'll wash and clean?
> *Jon*: Like a demon.
> *Ellen*: Change nappies?
> *Jon*: Every hour on the hour.
> *Ellen*: Buy the groceries.
> *Jon*: With Sam strapped to my chest.

The social fact of the normal family and family work is unabashedly undisguised. We sympathise with Jonathan because he is such a good wife and mother to a philanderer, in the way we would sympathise with any good wife and mother.

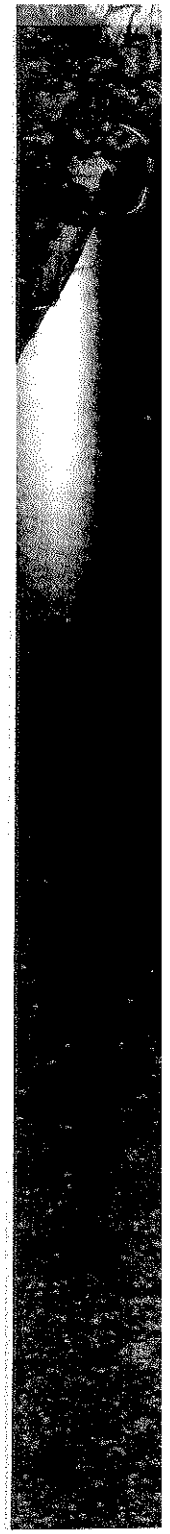
> *Jon*: You still don't understand do you ? You're right. I *am* giving up. I *can't* handle this. Don't you see? I'm jealous . . . I'm jealous of the fact that you say you love me, but I can't seem to give you what you need, that you'd destroy your self-respect by fucking anything in a skirt that will have you rather than be content with me.

Yet it is Jonathan's gender that gives him the exit permit out of the female trajectory that he lives in for the first three years of Sam's life. Thus, while his complaints may well mirror myriad women's lives in the normal world, he can just decide to pack it in in a moment. There is no guilt, no angst, no tears here. Indeed, it is Ellen who does the crying. And the resolution is so simple: Sam is put under Jonathan's parents' care; and Jonathan, after an absence of three years from law, finds a job pretty quickly. He exits as only a man who is experimenting with a woman's trajectory can.

As I have also argued elsewhere (PuruShotam 1993: 3–4), the most astute evaluation of the normal life trajectory for women in a patriarchally gendered world comes from the mouths of Yu's three fat virgins in her play *Three Fat Virgins Unassaulted* (1991). Their words are laced

with bitter, perhaps even bitter-sweet experiences. They tell it like it is not only because, like many of the women out in the real world, they have lived the trajectory, but also because they are not fooled by the small print in the gender contract that they have been living by. Yu's play is about three women conversationally examining their lives as women and the lives of women generally. The play goes right to the heart of the meaning of 'woman' as a gendered category, including the trajectory of being 'woman'. Marriage is recognised as the pivotal point within this trajectory. There is a clear signal that the social self of a woman is not possible until it is conjoined to a husband and to children. Indeed, the more children one has, the larger, even if more fragmented, her names and so her self will be. Women can and do have the alternative of not getting married, by becoming nuns, or earning lots of money. Still, an unmarried status is marked by the male world one lives in. Thus, women can mostly work in female jobs, epitomised by the profession of a secondary school-teacher. That is, female qualities and skills are defined in terms of a male ideological and consumer market. The body of a woman then, a real woman, cannot be sold for itself, to make money for the woman who owns it, but the body, its virginity, can be sold for a husband. Nuns, at the same time, are only hiding their fatness behind their habit – fatness being a symbol of unattractiveness to males and so the male world. Marriage therefore is practically unavoidable. The gender trajectory is shown to be nothing more than a poor choice in lieu of even poorer choices, in so far as its meanings derive from a male polity and society. If woman is to be located in a man's world, then the reality of a trajectory pivoted upon marriage, the gender meanings associated with it, must always be marked by three qualities: sadness, virginity, and fatness.

Sadness arises from the fact that a woman can never own her body. If it is not marked by possession by a man, then it lacks meaning. Yet after the fact of possession can come the fact of being discarded. Virginity that attracts is spent and so is the attraction. Sadness is also unavoidable when one becomes a woman. For, 'one is not born a woman but becomes one'; and one becomes one from choosing from a limited range of options – nun-virgin, unmarried virgin, educated virgin-with-a-profession, wise virgin for having married a rich man, and foolish virgin, for having married a poor man. It is a 'sadness that is harder for thin men with balding heads and paunches to understand. This has nothing to do with penis envy.' Virginity is a permanent disability. It marks the inexperience of women as an enduring reality in a man's world. Women will always be unsure how to react, what to be, when to do, for the rules of the games being played are not made by them nor for them. You can't



even tell' where the dividing line between a joke and sexual harassment is, exactly'. Virginity is a mark of unattractiveness, that you have not (hopefully, just not yet) been desired, consumed by a man. So virginity is a waiting by 'the pure young virgin of 17'. But the waiting can never end. For consummation does not end it. Unlike food, the woman is still there to be desired, to be consumed again. Thus, after marriage particularly, there is always the return to virginity, 'the unwanted fat virgin of 27'. The trajectory is not developmental, evolutionary, progressive. 'Woman' as a meaningful gendered construct is condemned to a cycle of apprehensive pauses. Whether young or old, 'it's the same condition. Why do we see it differently?'.

Fatness is about the body of women and its preparedness for men. Sexuality, sexual attraction and so the desired loss of virginity involve having a desirable body; a thin one.

Virgin A: I simply have to lose ten kilos before the annual dinner and dance.
Virgin B: I signed up for a slimming course you know. Carrot juice and watermelon juice. That's all they allow you to take.
Virgin C: It cost me five hundred dollars! Of course it works! . . .
Virgin B: I hate to diet . . .
Virgin A: But then why do you diet?
Virgin B: My husband makes jokes about me in front of our friends.
Woman (as B's husband): My wife is on a seafood diet. When she sees food she eats it.

At the same time, in trading virginity for marriage, a married woman, especially a wise one, gains a provider: he provides car, house, food, a social life; she consumes in accordance with what he provides, not what she wants or needs; she gains fat – a certain stolidity, a weightiness that makes it difficult to run away; and so she regains her virginity.

Virgin B: Darling, I've decided that I'm going to pull my life together!
Woman (playing man): That's wonderful, Darling. How much money do you need this time?
Virgin B: I don't – I didn't . . .
Woman: Here, take this. Buy yourself something nice. No one can say that I am not a generous husband where you are concerned. I am always more than generous. I am more generous than any other husband I know who has a wife as fat as you are.
Virgin B: Thank you, Darling. You are always so good to me.

Woman: Darling, now let's go out to dinner to celebrate! What do you feel like eating?
Virgin B: Oh Darling, the thing is, you see, my diet . . .
Woman: You can start tomorrow!
Virgin B: Oh . . . tomorrow we're supposed to be going to have dinner with your golfing friends . . .
Woman: Darling . . . I don't like this. Are you saying appearance is more important to you than our relationship? . . . than spending time with my friends? Have you forgotten how lucky you are that I married you in spite of your fatness?
Virgin B: No, no, no, Darling . . . Of course our relationship is important and I want to spend time with your friends. And I will never forget how lucky I am to have married you.

In sum, the meaningfulness of 'woman', the experience she is thus allowed to have, condemn her always to the sadness of being a fat virgin:

Woman: For a woman to be a fat virgin, it is not necessary for her to be fat. Neither is it necessary for her to be a virgin. It is only necessary for her to be a woman.

Strangely, shockingly too, the words of this virgin actually mirror the argument in Prime Minister Lee's statements about women. 'Women', said Lee, 'need incentives not disincentives' to conform to what is required of them. To be woman in a middle-class society is, at once, to have a disadvantaged life, with built-in advantages for everyone including (therefore) women themselves. Fatness is disadvantageous, but not to be fat is not to have the choices and the means to consume the choices by which one gets fat. Virginness is restrictive, but conforming to restrictions brings rewards, with time. The underlying proviso is that women must do the work necessary to bring about those rewards, encapsulated in the middle-class way of life that they, their husbands and their children can enjoy. The middle-class way of life as a way of normal family life becomes a fundamental given.

In this way Wong's and Yu's radicalism is powerful but restricted. It is imagined not for the real world, but for the theatre. Woman and her sympathisers can laugh, even when the message is inherently sad. The laughter helps the tension of the real world that women continue to reproduce, that middle-class way of life which paradoxically cannot be reproduced if she chooses not to reproduce it. But middle classness offers a powerful constraint on women's politics: the family as it is, 'normal', reified, is the centre of middle-class reality, and the family is reified because it is 'normal', 'moral' and therefore without any acceptable alternative.

UNVEILING THE MIDDLE CLASS: WOMAN POWER IN CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE

> [I]f domestic *ta'a* (obedience) is challenged by weak women, how can men be expected to lower their eyes in defence to the leader? The modesty of the Arab women is the linchpin of the whole political system. Entire chapters in the collections of *Hadith* . . . dictate to us how to braid our hair, how to lower our eyes, and how to slip on modesty like a camisole. . . . The civil codes reproduce in every article the picture of the family in the image of the caliphal palace, where *ta'a* is required and the will of the leader overrides that of all others. The battle of the 1990s will be a battle over the civil codes, which women challenge. . . . [T]hrough education and paid work, modernity has . . . [allowed women to] speak an unknown language. The equality they demand . . . is [condemned as] a foreign imported idea. [So women become] targets of intimidation and violence . . . that hark back to the past. Tomorrow the same thing can happen elsewhere. The reason is simple: women . . . [t]oday constitute one of the most dynamic components of the developing civil society . . . The relentless battle doesn't target just any woman. One precise category is aimed at: middle-class women who have had access to education and valorising salaried jobs. . . . Their obsession is with the woman who enjoys all the visible privileges of her modernity.
>
> (Mernissi 1993: 153, 157)

I selected this quotation with the intent to disturb, if not shock, those feminist friends and acquaintances who have argued that the Singapore woman today is not that badly off, is differently – better – positioned than her contemporaries elsewhere in the world; and, in any case, is in an enviable enough political position, because the ruling elite will negotiate with her and grant her requests if she can craft her language to suit the modern times. In this we have forgotten that, if the texts by which we do the world are better texts, it is in part because at the dawn of the birth of Singapore, women made their presence felt, their voices heard; they also took to the streets. They spent time deliberating upon how the world was constructed, and argued about how this must be done differently. A central principle of such deliberations and demands referred to a better life for all based on a concern with equal rights. This term encapsulated the desire for a world in which power would be better distributed. The perspectives of women, and by that token, children, would have an equal place with those of men in reconstructing life. That is, women struggled to deliberate upon given texts by which everyday life

was reproduced, and, more significantly, they struggled to *author* the texts by which life would be reproduced in the future.

Sadly, by the time Singapore was expelled from the Federation of Malaysia, and came into its own, Singapore women were busily involved in doing their middle-class life largely according to texts constructed for them by a male polity. The eventual awareness of this in the 1980s, however, came not from the ground up, but from top-down statements about women, followed by policies affecting their lives. In the main, the concern has arisen from the fear of falling I have discussed above. At the same time, there has been a growing recognition that the dissenting female voices need to be aired in the corridors of male power. It is argued by some of the most powerful and prominent female activists that this male power both holds the means to grant the change and is open to persuasion.

This reading is tempting, given the fear of falling. Indeed, the Singaporean woman, it appears, can do anything she wants. She can be granted spaces in such relatively exalted niches as parliament and the cabinet. In any case, she will be reasonable about these possibilities, policing herself in terms of the demands that the family 'normally' makes on her. The middle-class woman, then, is in the enviable position of having access to all the 'visible privileges of her modernity'. Monogamy and romantic marriage have replaced polygamy. Schools, colleges and the university opened their doors to females. With that came employment opportunities and the 'supplementary' wage. Homes in which husbands rather than mothers-in-law presided could be jointly owned. Even the marketplace expanded, making and selling the woman material and ideational goods often catering to her body's needs, her mind, her lifestyle and the lifestyles which she desired for her husband and children. As I have shown, through these material and ideational choices, women continuously reproduce a middle-class way of life and society, mirroring the ruling elite's images of that class.

Yet something went wrong, or almost wrong, viewed from the perspective of the male political elite – something that should alert us women to the power that we possess and do not have to be granted from some external source. In reproducing their lives *vis-à-vis* the dominant ideology of the normal family, women are one of the key players in the ongoing construction of a particularly middle-class way of life that marks Singapore society as a whole. This means that if women choose to do everyday life differently, then the form and substance of this way of life itself, including the accomplishment of her current largely subordinate position, will undergo changes. The ruling elite is clearly very aware of the formidable place that the contemporary middle-class

women of Signapore occupy. It is no coincidence that the elite's concern about the continuation of the middle-class way of life, as it has been reproduced thus far, takes women as its main subjects and objects of social control. Neither is it, to stress the point, a reflection of women's powerlessness and therefore a case of the elite's picking on a group which can be intimidated. Instead, the middle-class woman is the one who is intimidating.

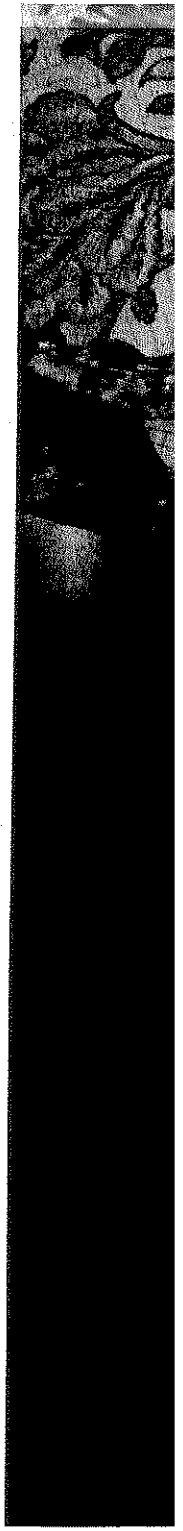
First, despite the lack of a conscious or concerted plan, women began to actually realise and so prove their capacity to change the fabric of Singaporean society. They began making independent judgments, rereading their position in the normal family in liberating terms. They sought more and more education; they treated careers seriously and therefore postponed and sometimes refused marriage and children; or they limited the number of children they would bear and raise; they preferred to make time for themselves as persons, rather than as a social category tied to husband and child, family and state; and they exercised their right to divorce themselves from bad, and unequal marriages. If these new ways of reproducing personal lives take root, the middle-class way of life thus reproduced will surely be vastly different. Second, these acts were political acts, even if women were innocent of this aspect of their content. They bring with them the spectre of individual choice, individual rights, individualism *per se*, in a political context that not only openly dismisses the individualist conceptualisation of people as irrelevant, even dangerous, but which also embraces a highly particularised notion of communitarian democracy. This notion of democracy sees the state/ruling elite as the only component of society that has the expertise and the legitimacy, the right if you will, to decide what the community's interests are to be, and how these are to be implemented.[16]

That is why, like the 'Arab women' whom Mernissi discusses, Singaporean women must be constrained by civil codes. These may not be as specific, as neatly packaged and so clearly identifiable as those collected in the *Hadith*, but they are there nevertheless. Women can roam as far as is allowed by the normal family ideology, which encapsulates community interests defined by the male polity. The boundaries she must not cross are underscored by the context of myriad fears of losing her present privileges. In other words, the middle-class Singaporean woman is as much veiled as her Arab counterpart, albeit in her case she is veiled by 'the family'. This veil, this boundary, is an insidious one, because it is less visible in the separate, enclosed enclaves it constructs for women. Yet it does impose a powerful and limited boundary upon women. First, it imposes a calendar of life, a normal unfolding that flows from childhood, courtship, marriage, wifehood and motherhood.

Second, underlying this calendar is an omnipresent timetable of daily demands. Third, and as a corollary to both calendar and timetable, it creates and perpetuates experience and social reality in which the world is dichotomised into the realm of the private/female sphere, and public/male sphere. In such a dichotomous world, underscored by this timetable, women feel the pressures, including the emotional and psychic pressures, to do the family first – and only to enter public life if that timetable allows them some time to do so. Usually this requires the women to wait until their children, if not their husbands, are independent of them. Often by that time the contribution she feels she can make is by way of voluntary work in charitable organisations, or voluntary work in civic organisations, rather than contributing a powerful perspective for change arising from her experiences as mother, wife and so forth. Indeed, given the private–public conceptualisation of the world, these perspectives often tend to get dismissed as personal and irrelevant. Yet, as this chapter has argued, (and as is argued elsewhere in this volume) the private and the public are 'so deeply involved with each other that the impoverishment of one entails the impoverishment of the other' (Bellah *et al.* 1986: 163).

Unlike the *hijab*, the Singaporean family does not come with an actually available text, authored by the powerful figure of Allah, but is enshrined in nebulous texts, from nebulous sources. The 'Arab woman' learns the text of the Koran from the time that she is a child (Mernissi 1993: 77–80). She can use it to quote chapter and verse, and so, (as studies on the Arab women's movements show) can contest the polity's interpretations of gender (ibid.: 160–1). When texts are as nebulous as their sources, the oppressiveness of the normal family is disempowering, not energising. This is what makes Wong's and Yu's plays, in the end, so sad: women cannot see and so reread the frames by which they do their lives. Indeed, the normal family is perceived to be a reified institution, that just is: not a text from which women themselves create the social reality.

The sadness need not lock us out, however, for it provides a key. If a chord is struck, then there is space for women to come together and explore this sadness. That space must be used with greater creativity, more potent imaginings, to raise questions and heighten consciousness. We have the power already. It is locked up within us, and left locked because we fail to see that the key to our liberation must start with ourselves. We must recognise that this normal family is a modern-day construct that we have participated in creating and maintaining. It is a veil which hides us from the more pertinent and powerful perspective that a questioning attitude might bring us. We need to recognise that we



do have the choice to drape the veil over ourselves, that we can choose to see and so craft questions and answers that can empower us. Are these texts mostly readings of a heavily male-dominant commentary on what 'woman' is? Or are these texts the work of our own constructions, committed to the perspectives and concerns that arise from our confidence in our own varied social realities? Thus, what kinds of texts do we want to use to reconstruct our world? What kinds of texts should be given political legitimacy?

This should involve a serious re-evaluation of women's place in the constitution of Singapore, as well as especial reference to the invisible or silenced promises in the Women's Charter. This Charter arose from the demands of women and men in Singapore in the late 1950s that the unequal position of women in Singapore should be rectified, with proper legislative backing. By the time the Charter was actually passed, in 1961, it had become yet another male document, with little in it of the original intention to ensure women's equal rights in Singapore. We need to revamp history, or at least add to it, with herstory. If Asian traditions must form the base of legitimate argumentations, then we need to realise the inhumane consequences of these traditions. We also need to be aware that the body of Asian traditions clearly includes those institutions and ideologies arguing for women's rights.

Singaporean women require a blueprint that will involve working with and forging bonds with ourselves: we need to recognise the gossamer threads we may desire are only a web of someone else's construction, a trap. We must start with the basics: ourselves, and an understanding of our real power as fully equal citizens of the nation we belong to and care about. Equality does not come from a top-down granting of concessions. Equality is a text built into our constitution. If this is given primacy, what sort of voice will we speak with, and what sort of world will we reproduce? It is not a question for one individual to answer, certainly; but it is a necessary question, a crucial beginning by which the potential power of the resource rich middle-class woman can be used to allow her class to come into its own. The reasons for this are simple: the contemporary Singapore woman has the potential to ensure the growth and development of the truly civil society to which both middle-class men and women in Singapore aspire.

NOTES

1 For four very special, insuppressible women: Chung Yuen Kay, Joan Bungar, Falaq Kagda and Stephanie Sim.

2 This paper has been particularly difficult. Apart from drawing my data from my field experience in Singapore and primary documentary sources, the insights that I bring to bear upon the data cannot be pried from my experiences as a woman living in Singapore today. This includes my work as a feminist here. It is the presence of the insights from the latter that cause me particular anxiety. I grappled long and hard with what I have had to say. Indeed, in the first drafts of this paper, I decided to barely make reference to some of the most important points – in my opinion – that are now a part of this paper.

3 This reflects the question that Robison and Goodman (1996: 9) posed.

4 For greater details on the economic history of Singapore see Chia (1989).

5 In an examination of statistical data available for the middle class of two public housing estates in Singapore, Leong (1995) lists these factors as comprising the fields of life experiences that those Singaporeans who labelled themselves as 'middle class' were referring to. Leong also noted that in this respect no one factor dominated. Thus, for example, the identification with middle class was certain if a person lived in a particular type of apartment. But those who do not live in such apartments would use other means by which their sense of being of the middle class could be achieved.

6 This was given clear voice in a forum on the role of intellectuals in contemporary Singapore, that was organised by the editors of *Commentary*, the National University of Singapore Society's Journal. As one of the participants of the forum, Daren Tang, stated: '. . . for us, material pursuits take up most energy. This is tied to the fact that the fear people feel has been subsumed into the urge for material pursuits. All political and intellectual energies are directed towards that end. I don't know how entrenched these fears are, but if this is removed, in some ways people might be more willing to channel their energy towards other materialistic activities' (*Commentary* 1993: 59–60).

7 A fuller treatment of the historical development of this ideology is in PuruShotam (1993).

8 PuruShotam (1993: 17–20).

9 People's Action Party 1959 (Part 2), 17–19.

10 One of the central tenets of PAP rule in Singapore rests on the paradigm that Singapore is a multiracial society, constituted by four main races. These are defined as the 'Chinese', the 'Malay', the 'Indian' and the 'Other'. These biological differentiations between these groups, it is further assumed, are at the root of their sociocultural differences. Accordingly, to be 'Chinese' for instance is to acknowledge the biologically given social and cultural specificities that makes one properly 'Chinese'. Thus all real Chinese should learn to speak their officially defined mother tongue, Mandarin. An elaborated discussion of this is found in PuruShotam, forthcoming.

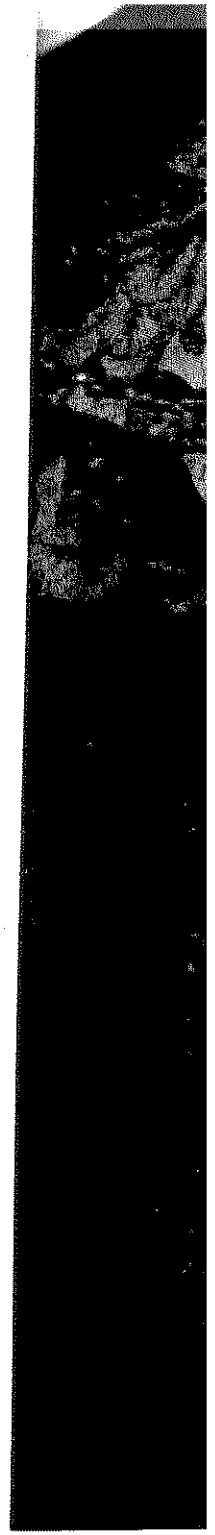
11 See Wong and Leong (1993) and Eng Wee Ling (1993).

12 I have delineated the various choices women have in this respect in PuruShotam (1992).

13 A detailed explication of this in terms of the politics of gender that this engenders is found in PuruShotam (1995b).

14 However, it seems clear to me that a complex of orientations, largely the feminist with the anti-feminist even, can and does exist outside of Singapore society too.

15 There are two other aspects in this speech that must be noted. First, Lee referred to his fundamental belief in research that ascertained that people are constituted of 80 per cent nature and 20 per cent nurture (Lee Kuan Yew



1983). He did not spell out the sex/gender connection in this. But it is imperative that we bear in mind the idea of genetic differences between males and females that is embedded in this kind of sociobiological argumentation. Second, the tactic of the government approach to the problem of women, as identified by them, is revealed here. Women need 'incentives' – the soft approach – to rectify the social problem that they are and could continue to be. Incentives to become 'good' women, I would argue, appeal to women to deliberate upon the normal and so moral thing women should be doing. This is compounded by the appeal that if women do not do the right thing as women, then 'our economy will falter, the administration will suffer, and the society will decline' (Lee Kuan Yew 1983). The limits of what is possible for women are to be placed on them only because the stakes are so high. Needless to say these very same stakes are what has enabled the continuation of upward social and economic mobility. The limits of what is possible for women are normal and moral; and are about the possibility, otherwise, of all of us together falling from the level we have been brought to.

16 See Chua Beng Hunt (1995: 184–202).

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6 'Flower vase and housewife'

Women and consumerism in post-Mao China[1]

Beverley Hooper

In March 1992, China's national women's newspaper complained that the country's burgeoning advertising industry was casting women in two contrasting roles, both of which had adverse implications for women's lives in modernising China:

> [There is] the open 'modern flower vase' type, luxuriously adorned and bejewelled, proponent of advanced consumerism' . . . [and] there is the traditional virtuous wife and good mother who is generally associated with kitchen utensils, washing machines, refrigerators, and other consumer goods related to housework.
>
> (*Zhongguo funü bao*, 20 March 1992: 3)[2]

Starting from a situation of imposed austerity and asexual representations at the end of the Mao era in 1976, post-Mao China presents a striking case study of the creation of a gendered consumer culture. This culture is only beginning to emerge, but women are already being utilised to create and manipulate personal desires, both as consumers and as sexualised objects of consumption.[3] This chapter examines the 'flower vase and housewife' roles currently ascribed to women in the context of China's modernisation, particularly the growth of a consumer society and culture set against reduced state control over people's everyday lives.[4]

The creation of a consumer society has been central to China's recent economic development. Per capita material consumption has risen at an average annual rate of 7 per cent since the inauguration of the post-Mao economic reforms in 1978, taking China from a state-controlled economy towards a market economy, somewhat euphemistically labelled the 'socialist market economy'. For most of the post-Mao era, China has had the highest growth rate in Asia, with GDP annual growth averaging 9 per cent. Annual per capita income has more than doubled. While it still stands officially at only $US655, one of the lowest figures