

# OVIDIA YU

## EIGHT PLAYS

THE WOMAN IN A TREE ON THE HILL • THREE FAT VIRGINS  
PLAYING MOTHERS • LOVE CALLS • BREASTISSUES  
LIFE CHOICES • THE SILENCE OF THE KITTENS  
HITTING (ON) WOMEN

INTRODUCTION BY DR. K. K. SEET

OVIDIA YU has written over thirty plays including *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*, the only Singapore play to win an Edinburgh Fringe First. In her writing she uses humour and storytelling to address the changing roles and identities of Singaporeans, on the principle that without entertainment there can be no engagement. Ovidia Yu received the National Arts Council Young Artist Award (Drama and Fiction), the Singapore Youth Award (Arts and Culture), and the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry Singapore Foundation Award for outstanding contribution to the development of arts.

DR. K. K. SEET established the Theatre Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore in 1992. He has authored 13 books, published numerous academic papers and adjudicated many arts-related competitions, including *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards, where he is the longest standing judge, and the Singapore Literature Prize, for which he served as Chief Judge for many years. For his contributions to arts and culture, Dr. Seet was conferred the Special Recognition Award by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts in 2005. Dr. Seet now divides his time among his homes in Singapore, Thailand and the United Kingdom.

# OVIDIA YU EIGHT PLAYS

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Introduction by Dr. K. K. Seet



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For Dr. K. K. Seet  
whose support, encouragement and inspiration  
shaped this book along with much of Singapore theatre

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## **A FEMALE COUNTER-CANON: OVIDIA YU AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER**

Introduction by Dr. K. K. Seet

Ovidia Yu is that rare breed of Singapore writer in at least two ways. In terms of versatility, she shares certain qualities with her literary predecessor, Goh Poh Seng, who has demonstrated aptitude and craft across a spectrum of genres.

Yu was barely out of her teens when she burst, nova-like, on the scene with her short story *A Dream of China* which won the Asiaweek short story contest in 1984. She has remained one of the youngest winners in Asiaweek's hallowed hall of fame. Yu then proved her mettle in screen writing when she dramatised her script *Round and Round the Dining Table* for television. Two novels, *Mouse Marathon* and *Ms. Moorthy Investigates*, followed, proving that Yu could sustain a narrative, be it a satire about the rat race or a whimsical detective drama about a schoolteacher turned sleuth. A string of musicals evinced her ability to provide book and lyrics for a composer, whether it was a big budget corporate extravaganza like the Singapore General Hospital's *Everyday Brings Its Miracles* or TheatreWorks' *Haunted*, with an all-star cast which endeavoured to put Singapore's sitcom personalities, jazz divas and Dimsum Dollies all on one platform.

In between all this, she wrote many plays, some inspired, others commissioned, some (like her contributions to the book, *Mistress*) anthologised, others (like *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*) showcased to great acclaim and rapturous reception at the Edinburgh Festival.

Yet the prolific Yu is also a rare specimen in another way. As Singapore's first truly feminist writer and unabashed chronicler of all things female, she has no literary precedent as such within the

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Singapore theatrical canon where she has earned a berth.

The pioneers of Singapore theatre: from Lim Chor Pee and Goh Poh Seng in the 1960s to Robert Yeo in the 1970s and Kuo Pao Kun writing in English in the 1980s were all male. While Stella Kon made waves with her monologue, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, the degree to which her female protagonist both mimics and resists her patriarchal oppressors in a manner which makes her both threat to and co-conspirator with those who “othered” her, renders her text problematic in terms of both its ideological positioning and its body politic. How is Emily Gan inscribed as a site for feminist resistance? To what degree does she symbolise emasculation, the assimilation of patriarchal strategies in order to wield power in a turf predetermined by men?

Yu is in many respects a true original in not suffering the anxiety of influence that would beset any male writer within a particular literary genealogy, who, in Harold Bloom’s conceptualisation of literary psychohistory, would necessarily need to invalidate his literary forefather in a kind of Oedipal struggle before he can take his place within the canon. In this regard, one detects the tensions and anxieties, the unconscious efforts to affirm or deny the achievements of Kuo in the works of Yu’s male peers, Haresh Sharma and Tan Tarn How.

Yu, conversely, does not even betray vestiges of what Gilbert and Gubar would have called the anxiety of authorship, in fearing that the attempt at self-creation as a precursor might conflict with her own gender definition, that she cannot beget art without isolating herself. In fact, Yu spawns a separate female subculture that surfaces ostensibly in the works of her contemporaries like Eleanor Wong and Eng Wee Leng, with its distinctive concerns, timbre and inflections. Instead of questioning her place within the literary trajectory, Yu’s plays

grapple with issues that trouble her as a woman writing about women. They exemplify what Judith Butler has articulated in *Undoing Gender* as the difficulty in distinguishing “the life of gender from the life of desire” primarily because “social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood”, an issue made even “more complex by the fact that the viability of our personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms”.

Whether Yu’s texts are to be considered a subgenre of the Singapore dramatic canon to be approached gynocritically depends a great deal on the inclusionary criteria for canonisation or the very constitutive basis of the canon, which is entrenched in a liberal humanist tradition that privileges the individual agency of the author who is then venerated for universal values and authenticity of vision. This schism in fact articulates two strands of feminist thinking, the Anglo-American with its emphasis on criticism and the French with an emphasis on theory.

The latter, exemplified by the likes of Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray, draws from theories of psychoanalysis and deconstruction to unveil the middle class, male values underpinning bourgeois, humanist critical practices. As Cora Kaplan puts it, since “the acting of writing and the romantic ideologies of individual agency and power are tightly bound together”, a woman’s subordinate, even marginalised position within culture makes her “less able to embrace or be held by romantic individualism”.

In a sense, Yu attempts to express this marginalised position of women outside of male ideological constitution and patriarchal symbolisation via a discourse that addresses notions of subjectivity, language and sexuality. The key concept here is femininity, not necessarily tied to biology though arbitrarily linked to women, and to

its construction as an ideological structure that governs femaleness and construed in terms of a binary that positions it against the masculine. In *Three Fat Virgins*, Jonathan Chee although male in biological constitution will suffer the same fate because of his professed femininity. Extending into language, this reductive binary, under the sway of phallogocentrism, associates women with the passive as against the active, mythos or falsehoods as against logos or the truth, the emotional as against the rational, nature as against culture, and can therefore never satisfactorily encode what Cixous terms “écriture feminine” which “will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system”. Yu captures the rich texture of écriture feminine in *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill* with rapid transitions in scenarios that defy dramatic causality, with language that sporadically moves from prose to verse to the brevity of axiom, with a heroine that is a composite of multiple personae so that one is hard-pressed to pinpoint who is the woman in a tree on the hill. Time, as we empirically know it, is transcended, while myriad identities inhere in that generic body of the Woman.

Because the female body and its associated gender constructions remain the site of much contestation between the sexes as well as the central object through which power relations are negotiated, the body figures as the locus of much theorising in these representative plays about women by Ovidia Yu, who is equally preoccupied with demonstrating how female bodies are regulated, controlled and objectified by the patriarchal system. This is apparent in *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*, which explores the dissolving boundaries between woman and nature, or *Breastissues*, about those very anatomical contours by which an idealised femininity is always defined, or even *Playing Mothers* and *Three Fat Virgins*, both of which whether

implicitly or explicitly map the female body in terms of its cycles and rhythms, drives and emanations, in tandem with the biological functions of menstruation, gestation and lactation.

Like Foucault and Derrida who challenged the Cartesian duality which subordinates materiality of body to rationalism of mind, Yu aligns herself to feminist thinkers who articulate that women are largely constituted by their bodies and embraces the Kristevian notion of the “abject” female body as unruly and resistant to easy pigeonholing. Yu is interested in how women’s bodies are mapped for male consumption and objectification, and often subverts the prevalent images of femininity in media representations, which either idealise or denigrate women, who then run the risk of internalising this dichotomy.

In *Three Fat Virgins*, fatness may be interpreted; in line with Susie Orbach’s *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, as refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations. A strategy which Yu deploys to reclaim the female body from male delectation is to reintegrate that sense of a self split, as it were, between surveyor and surveyed as outlined by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. Where men wield the scopophilic gaze while “women watch themselves being looked at”. This gaze is destabilised in *Three Fat Virgins*, which not only harnesses a plethora of possible interpretations of what a fat virgin is but also emphasises the performativity of gender by stipulating in its nebenscene that an actress assume the role of various male characters.

In a crucial scene in *Playing Mothers*, a play in which the bodily processes of women are visualised without reserve, from the blood of new birth to the sight of a disposed foetus like a lump of chicken fat, Audrey witnesses an abortion being performed and narrates it in gory detail, a scene which enables Yu to subvert that dialectic between

order = purity and disorder = pollution in the social configuration of societies, a polarity that has facilitated man's ascendancy over women by symbolically attributing this value system onto the female body. Instead of depicting the female body as a sealed container as is the case of the nude in high art or in a more contemporary context, the airbrushed advertising images of popular culture, Yu renders its corrective manifestation in an excess of bodily secretions almost akin to a boundless container without contours, the "volume fluidity" of Luce Irigaray's conception and also in tandem with the grotesque, carnivalesque body that undermines all social order.

Yu goes further as to propound that while women may be biologically programmed for the role of childbearer, they are not naturally predisposed to assume the role of mother, which is largely a psychosocial conditioning, a kind of performance hinted at by the title, *Playing Mothers*, and echoed throughout the play by the observation that Margaret has been "playing mother" for far too long and has no intrinsic identity. This necessarily recalls Judith Butler's "heteroreality", where all gender positions are viewed as types of performance. Between the siblings Lynn and Timothy, Timothy is seemingly more prepared as he says at one point, to even play the role of mother, operating as he is within the asexual universe of cross-pollinating botanical species, than his sister, who delivers one of the most evocative speeches about female bodily functions: that being a woman is about "menstrual cramps and tender breasts and bloody periods" that often interfere with the everyday business of living and that pregnancy is "much more than looking fat for nine months" as her husband Trevor simplistically assumes.

In *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*, the fragmentation of identities and dissolution of polar oppositions, with brother and sister, or woman

and reptile inhering in the same body of Nu Wa, Yu signals a shift to the postmodern body as another strategy for a woman's dissident body politics. Like the shifting signifiers of postmodernism, the dereliction of a binarism in gender enables the titular character in the play, the unnamed Woman, to finally reclaim her agency and power. In fact, in its eclectic references to an entire gamut of female incarnations from the legendary Nu Wa in Eastern cosmology, through Noah's wife from the Bible, Ibsen's Nora, the nymphs of Greek mythology and druids from pagan pastorate to the pontianak of urban Malay legends, the female body is located in a multiplicity of symbolic forms and this resists any easy co-option or marginalisation by the dominant discourse. There are, quite ostensibly in the historical passage, periods characterised by bodily liberation (*Körper-entfesselung*) and epochs marked by bodily circumscription (*Körperdisziplin*) and to ascribe any essentialism to the female body is misguided.

A representative work in which Yu considers the issue of the female body is the cunningly punning *Breastissues* (phonetically suggesting Breast Tissues are Breast Issues). Written in response to the growing rate of breast tumour among women by exhorting the need for early detection through regular mammogram and ultrasound, which can lead to preemptive treatment, the play uses this most distinctive part of a woman's anatomy to dissect the nature of self-denial as well as the intricately fraught relationships between women and their breasts, between women and their male partners, between women and their female friends, and between mothers and daughters.

One of the penultimate lines of dialogue has a character saying that "breasts are great touching points", the multivalent nature of the phrase encapsulating the delicate balance that Yu maintains between the emotional and physiognomical dynamics involving breasts and

their owners. They are great touching points by virtue of the mass of nerve endings that are highly susceptible to arousal. They are also great touching points in affecting a woman's self-esteem on account of her perception of their size and concomitant degree of desirability. They are also great touching points primarily because breasts consist entirely of fat cells and milk producing glands, skin and ligaments devoid of muscles entirely, such that their status, as the play evocatively puts it, "depends on the muscles of others...like ministers and movie stars" and are subject to the "influence of public media and reverse morality" in terms of perception and accoutrement. This paradox between the purely biological and the highly symbolic is intoned in an interlude in the drama when two male voices define the nature and functions of breasts even as one of the female protagonists, Susie, questions their ontological purpose. The male voiceovers are particularly pertinent in relation to the rest of the drama, which show breasts as territorialised by men while belonging essentially to women, an idea insinuated from the beginning of the play when a male voiceover requests to see the breasts of one of the three self-presenting protagonists.

The opening vignette already encapsulates this sense of discomfort felt by the women, aware of the unwarranted scrutiny to which their breasts are exposed. Susie is embarrassed by the undue attention on her buxomly frame. Monica suffers the inferiority complex of one with a flat chest. Even Mei, who is among the trio the least preoccupied with her breasts, gives up badminton so that there is no imbalance between the two halves of her physique. That breasts belong biologically to women but are determined symbolically by men is the root of much of the dilemma in this play. All three principal characters are trapped in a state of denial as a result of this, and to

some degree, have their lives ruled by this male fixation with breasts. Mei opts for a career in medicine so that she can camouflage her body with the iconic authority bestowed by a white coat. Monica pretends not to care about her figure but is in fact seeing a psychoanalyst. In her younger days, her sense of shame over what she considers her under-developed mammary organs causes her to avoid physical intimacy with men. Her latest quandary is over an offer by her current beau to buy her breast implants, and despite her hesitation, she reveals that bigger breasts would make her more "complete" as a woman. Mei, the closet lesbian, harbours secret fantasies of Susie's breasts and takes it more badly than Susie when the latter is diagnosed with breast cancer and requires a mastectomy. Even Susie, already bosomy, relishes the extra proportions her breasts assume during her state of pregnancy.

Ironically, Susie emerges the most clear-headed during her trial with cancer, able to cope with the changes to her body in a way her friends could not except through evasion or forced merriment. The main plot revolves around Susie, who risks losing not just one breast but both, and her agonising decision of whether or not to abort her pregnancy in order to save her own life. In the process, the myths and misconceptions of the older generation, exemplified by the reactions of Susie's mother to what she deems as the taboo nature of breasts, are debunked. Michael, Susie's husband, also emerges as more than the oaf he is made out to be. In one of the play's most touching moments, he puts his hands on Susie's disfigured chest and claims lovingly that he is now nearer to her heart.

Apart from a preoccupation with the politics of the body, the issue of Othering has always struck a chord in the feminist imagination, emerging as early as de Beauvoir's seminal work on the *Woman as*

*Other*. In this respect, Yu mirrors in her plays the same concerns and consciousness about implications of Othering, whether this is manifested as an awareness of “Other Others” expressed through her continuum of female dramatis personae, or through the mechanism of interrupting Othering and deconstructing Otherness by means of male characters who are largely absent or themselves Othered, which then leverages on the interplay of power between the sexes. Yu’s works thus invoke the images of women’s Otherness within misogynist discourse, some recurrent ones being catalogued in Jane Ussher’s *Women’s Madness* (1991) as the means by which phallogocentrism maintains women’s Otherness: women labeled mad for stepping out of line; women calculatedly positioned in the media for the male objectification; or women’s bodies functioning as the focal point for attributions of Otherness in scientific and medical discourses, science and medicine being established as masculine institutions.

In *Hitting (On) Women*, perpetually Othered as the result of not being able to carve space or recognition for themselves, the passion of the lovers is channeled into violence as a form of expression. As the abuser Karen explains via the analogy to crows in Singapore, one might as well be the loudest, most irritant crow if one is denied a place in the community and constantly hunted down. Conversely, in *Three Fat Virgins*, for example, the concept of the virgin is dissected for its many ramifications: as the “untouched” principle in terms of its biblical endorsement which maintains the reductive virgin-whore dialectic as well as the regulation of propriety where the egocentric male issues behavioural prescriptions and moral injunctions to the ego-less female; as the “inexperienced” Other which then facilitates the male’s position of mentor, guide and thought-provider. Whether as Madonna to be worshipped or the whore of Babylon to be used

and abused, women remain Othered as male constructs. Likewise the concept of fat encapsulates the essentialisation of something relative, in addition to the beauty myth sighted/sited in the female body, marked by thinness as the codification of its aesthetics. The entire gamut of “fat virgins” in this play, from the entomologist to the overweight wife, the repressed schoolteacher to the sexually harrassed secretary, including an entire cohort of social minorities like the unmarried aunt and the virgin dyke, each struggling against a degree of Othering, is testimony to Yu’s strong awareness of “Other Others”.

In tackling this whole notion of Othering, Yu is significant in speaking for the Asian and Third World Woman, who, as Mohanty has pointed out, “never rise(s) above the debilitating generality of the ‘object’ status” even after surpassing the ethnographic exotica of imperialist anthropology, primarily because white women trying to speak “for” or “about” third world women routinely end up colluding in Othering by replicating Orientalist discourse albeit in a feminist guise. This is not akin to what Guillaumin calls “altero-referential racism” which asserts the difference of Others as a way of defining oneself. Yu, in giving voice to Asian women, explores the processes of their representation to unveil the control exerted by the hegemonic patriarchy. Her plays show how women’s representations of themselves are often de-authorised as lacking in gravitas, credibility or legitimacy, and deemed not to fit within an official (read paternalistically) determined position. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the scene in *Three Fat Virgins* involving the tyrannical drama “auteur”, who wields unreasonable expectations and is totally unappreciative of the female volunteer, only to further browbeat her into submission with a bouquet of plastic flowers.

Another dominant characteristic of Yu is the way she configures

the feminine as an imaginative universal through the use of myth as a governing or structuring metaphor in her plays. Hans Blumenberg has highlighted the usefulness of myths in terms of an inherent paradox: “myths...are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation”. This then renders myths attractive in two ways: their constancy offers recognisability while their variability offers new ways of presenting them. Invoking the great myth-figures of the feminine like Nu Wa, the goddess of fertility in Eastern cosmology, Yu provides touchstones for collective feminine identification that transcend social specificities and in so doing, reclaim the retelling of “herstory”. Like Cixous and Irigaray before her, Yu rereads important myths as her “sorties” or routes out of the stranglehold of patriarchal strictures, to articulate a site of alterity that liberates her female protagonists.

Evident in *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill* and *Silence of the Kittens* are re-narrativisations of myth to serve a feminist agenda. If the allusion to matrilineal myths summons an order predating the Judaeo-Christian worldview or an Eastern pantheon alternative to it, then myth as a device serves as what Nor Hall calls “the original mother tongue” countering the Law of the Father. More important is the openness of myth which as Marina Warner sees, permits the “weaving of new meanings and patterns” and “creates its ongoing potency”. If one deploys the interpretation of myth in tandem with Lauri Honko’s twelve ways of perceiving myth, then one realises the potential of myth as, among other prescriptions, “a charter for behaviour” and “as art form symbolically structuring the world”.

In *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*, Yu goes as far as to reconceptualise the Noah story, making Mrs. Noah the true saviour of the ark while Noah is presented as a chauvinist carnivore who

loses “the winged messenger” and does not hesitate to roast the sole surviving unicorn on a spit for his dinner.

Another common view of myth as the primitive equivalent of science is outlined in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, where he sees “human evolution as progressing through cycles characterised in turn by magic and religion before culminating in the rationalism of science”. This also restores an earlier female realm which precedes the common equation of masculinity to science and rationalism. What is perhaps more interesting is Hans Blumenberg’s twist on this traditional notion of myth as compensating for “our biological non-adaptation by reducing the absolutism of reality” and serving to assuage “where rational explication cannot”. One can see in this definition the applicability to situations in Yu’s plays, which defy the absolutism of reality as stipulated by patriarchal discourse and its insistence on rational explication for everything.

In *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*, the suicidal woman climbs a tree in despair only to be re-energised by a new perspective of the world from way up high. “While a man climbs a tree in order to conquer it, a woman climbs a tree in order to be part of it.” Yet another reworking of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* sees Freud equating myth to the blissful ignorance of infancy, thereby aligning myth-making to that period of undifferentiated fusion with the world before the bifurcation between self and other occurs and the laws governing social order have been assimilated, a period which favours gynocracy. If myths, according to Freud, function in the mature adult as a means of “offering concocted solutions to intolerable situations”, then Yu illustrates the potency and appeal of myth-making as individual fantasy in lives of women governed by duress and labouring under oppression. Perhaps more compelling a manifesto for feminist myth-makers are Jung’s theories

of mythic archetypes that shape most fields of human endeavour, which assert that these archetypes provide an empty structure, a kind of migratory morpheme, the content of which can change in each new manifestation, making us aware of the transhistorical nature of its structure, to be filled by content relevant only within a specific time frame. Yu's intercultural approach, marshaling together references from Ibsen's *A Doll House* to *the Chinese Historical Records of 8 A.D.*, underlines this transhistorical and universal relevance and applicability of myth. To sum up, Marina Warner sees myth as either binding us to stock reactions, or else, as in their utilisation by Yu, providing the starting point for new tellings.

Closely aligned to myth is the fairytale tradition, which has also been embraced by feminist writers as a means of charting new ground. The prevalence of fairytales as a form of social conditioning is seen in *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill* where the narrator as a little girl expects to "live happily ever after" "like *Snow White* and *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Cinderella*". The dramatic trajectory of *Life Choices*, Yu's monologue about a girl who breaks all the rules yet attains some measure of success and comfort in life, can be read as Yu's contemporary renarrativisation of the fairytale tradition that has been made moralistic and patriarchal in recent times.

Tess Cosslett, in reading against the grain and tracking down earlier, woman-centered versions of fairytales, shows how the genre as we currently know it perpetuates flawed values and reductive stereotypes and are riddled with racial and gender biases. Citing the familiar examples of *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, Cosslett highlights how an erroneous correspondence is made between beauty and virtue where the beauty of the titular heroines is what wins the love of a prince after which "an equation is set up, in which beauty leads

to marriage, which leads to wealth". Consequently, "wealth is thus the highest goal to be aimed at, and marriage is the end point of a woman's life". In a similar vein, beauty is also constructed in terms of fairness, hinting at racial prejudices founded on the shade of one's complexion. Moreover, the image of Snow White reclined in a glass coffin waiting for the resurrecting kiss of a prince is the quintessence of female passivity, particularly in contrast to the schemes of her wicked stepmother. Cosslett therefore asserts that "female activity, resourcefulness, energy, anger, are equated with evil; female passivity with goodness". Even without resorting to earlier versions of these same fairytales that Cosslett has hunted down, which bear vestiges of an earlier matriarchal society where female agency was valorised, one can see how the dramatic development of Yu's *Life Choices* stands in subversive contrast to the fairytale template. The female protagonist is no virtuous fairytale heroine but a high school dropout who deviates from the trodden path. She brushes aside the best intentions of her mother, uses sexual wiles to secure her job, consents to be the mistress of her boss and precipitates his heart attack by divulging the affair to his wife in order to force him to a resolution. When she eventually finds herself as the victim of the same shenanigans, after her husband falls for his new secretary, she enters into a vindictive alliance with his ex-wife to blackmail him and achieves the final victory through her machinations. It is as if Snow White and her Wicked Stepmother had join forces to outwit and out-manoeuvre the errant King.

Apart from re-working of myths and inversions of the fairytale tradition, Yu often uses a leitmotif as the fulcrum for her play, usually contained in the title, upon which are pivoted various descants from the central theme. In *The Silence of the Kittens*, Yu uses the practice of culling of stray cats for extermination in Singapore as a commentary

on a series of diverse but related issues ranging from repression to marginalisation. Inspired by a policy that came into force despite protest by animal protection groups and lobbies, and commissioned as an item for the first Singapore Theatre Festival by Singapore company Wild Rice, *The Silence of the Kittens* takes its parodic title from *The Silence of the Lambs* to intimate another kind of “silencing”, the snuffing of alternative discourses, alternative paradigms, even alternative histories by using the cat as its organising conceit and then teasing out the multi-modality of this trope as it morphs from permutation to permutation. In this late work, she combines the invocation of myths with a subversion of the fairytale frame. While the play opens with the classic gambit “once upon a time, long long ago and far far away”, the ending calculatedly undermines any sense of happily ever after by conjuring a scenario where all denizens succumb to the safety and complacency of a sanitised cocoon. The authenticity of the nation’s nomenclature is called to question in a satiric vignette at the start of the play as Raffles the founder is unsure about the large cat he sees, from which the name of Singapore is derived according to legend. Befitting Singapore’s sleek, rapidly developing image, it might more appropriately, as one of characters suggests, a puma or a jaguar. It could just as well have been a tiger, more indigenous to these parts, a metaphoric sleight of hand which enables the playwright to smuggle in an allusion to the Tiger Beer Promoter, the sexy hawker of Singapore’s most famous brew, an image belittling to women. Interspersed among all these revisionist references and hypotheses is a jibe at Singapore tourism icon, the Merlion, to underline the compromises made in the name of economic progress. Here, the big cat Raffles sees hesitates over a contractual agreement that requires it “to put on a fishtail and spout water”.

The “silencing”, as more than a species of vocal castration, emerges forcefully when character C, the man of the family and Member of Parliament, talks about how he has been “sterilised” with “mortgages and COEs” and neutered by obligations to wife and children. But the “inner cat” within him resists domestication and relishes the need to prowl in the night. The condition is however not confined to men. The female character A also divulges about the cat inside her which keeps her awake at night as it searches for “a way out of this life”. The recurrent idea of a cat that refuses to be tamed, that hints at resistance towards conscription into a system that compels the production of emic discourses, is thrown in high relief by the galvanising impulse of this play, which is to save the feral cat. The ability of the alley cat in particular, and all cats in general, to “adapt to different climates, different cultures” also contrasts with the human need to create “safe environments” to eliminate such risks as “drunk drivers, drug traffickers, opposition party members, stray cats, homosexuals, the *Da Vinci code*, *Harry Potter*”. As the preposterous plurality of this last list suggests, the cat is positioned as the incendiary agent against hegemonic systems which strive to be monolithic, partisan and fundamentalist.

Subsequently, that latent cat in every individual assumes macrocosmic dimensions as the inner cat within an entire community or city that “remains unsubdued” even as that community or city creates a “powerful outer cat”. Sustaining the cat motif and emphasising the reference to Singapore, Yu construes as an emblem of the powerful outer cat the “white stone lions” reminiscent of the Merdeka Bridge symbols. These point to a society which believes in producing relentlessly territorial alpha male cats that brook no dissent or disagreement and end up as the conformism-heavy but

compassion-light “Little Dictators and Little Buddhas” who have no idea how to function once they “set foot outside [the] sanctified walls of virtue and malls of faith”. After earlier citing St. Francis of Assisi’s belief that those with no compassion for little animals will treat fellow humans in the same way, the play ends with the dystopic vision of a clean, protected, safe society where empathy and basic human decency, like extending kindness to strangers and holding a door open for the elderly, become obsolete. En route, as a means of comparison, Yu invokes myths about cats from China, Egypt, Catholic lore, and even the Islamic canon, to document other societies which valorise cats such that it becomes evident the “C” word refers not only to cat but to compassion.

In *Love Calls*, the title is also heavily ironic. The play is premised on the fact that one of the principal female characters rules the airwaves as the host of a radio programme where viewers call in to talk about love. Here, Yu brings the scalpel to the prostrate body of contemporary relationships between men and women. If there exists an insurmountable chasm between the sexes as a result of the entrenchment and internalisation of socioculturally prescribed gender roles, the new media exacerbates this by heightening the risks of miscommunication and misunderstanding it entails. Min represents the modern bipolar woman, sufficiently conditioned by society into believing that men and marriage are still the ultimate goals beyond career, freedom and self-affirmation but plugged at the same time into the role-playing and unbridled license that the performative anonymity and virtual reality of internet chat room sex and “cyber significant others” offer. Her friendship with Sandra demonstrates that women are merely the conduits to men and the convenient fallback when relationships with men fall apart. She cancels on Sandra when she

is frolicking with a new beau but expects Sandra to play confidant and counselor when her liaisons fail. Moreover, with her addiction to cybersex and her trivialization of the symbolism of her engagement ring, Min superficially resembles Kathleen Rowe’s concept of the “unruly woman” with her ribald excesses, used to destabilised notions of idealised female behaviour. In radical contrast to her cyber date, Harry of Minnesota (who is monogamous, faithful, ready to commit), Min disrupts the male gaze by turning the tables on conventional gender dynamics.

The subtlety of Yu’s craft is often evident in her mode of character revelation. In a play that is essentially a series of imaginary conversations between the female protagonist and her late lover, it is astounding that much of character revelation arises out of the dramatic conflicts inherent in situations and scenarios rather than being dialogue-driven and expositional. The references to the splayed chin and the crooked posture are the first indications of Karen’s violent streak and their commonplace emergence in what comes across initially as phatic communion intensifies the horror by means of the deliberate contrast. The introduction of supporting characters, who then offer an alternative perspective, like Mr. Pillay the landlord, often serves to flesh out character in an elliptical way. What one character considers a helping hand is perceived by another as intrusion and betrayal and by the third as necessary counteractive measure. Karen’s holier-than-thou self-arrogation of the role of protector (“It was for your own good”, she explains her rationale for locking the female protagonist in her room) is challenged when Mr. Pillay retorts by repeating the very indictment she levies on him: “Who do you think you are?” Therein lies Yu’s ability to tease the insightful out of the humdrum and make a superficially banal incident speak volumes.

Yet another striking feature of Yu's plays is how often she structures her dramatic narratives in the confessional mode. *Life Choices* is one solitary voice interspersed and interjected by invisible interlocutors. *Hitting (On) Women*, in so far as it represents an interior monologue of the female protagonist couched as an imaginary dialogue with her deceased ex-lover with whom she has unresolved issues, is an extended confession aimed at a kind of Artaudian therapy through exorcism of psychological demons. *Three Fat Virgins*, framed largely in Brechtian aesthetics of direct presentation and much slipping in and out of multiple personae in a manner that lays bare the text's artistic armature, may be construed as the splintered selves of one generic Othered woman who is marginalised for the various associations of "fat" from undesirable, ill-disciplined to dim-witted and lazy. Yu's confessional mode assumes interesting implications when read alongside Foucault's revised take on the act of confession in his *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self* (1980). Earlier, in *The History of Human Sexuality: Volume 1*, Foucault sees the confessional in psychoanalysis as the descendant of the religious confession, with the agencies of modern political power recirculating elements from Christian institutions such as "pastoral power" or certain classes of individuals vested with authoritative discourses who then administer and thereby control the person confessing, with the analysis and subjected to a normalising judgment. This perspective renders the confessional in the service of regulation and control. However, his subsequent autocritique of this position, in the consideration of church-father John Cassian, Foucault constructs the act of confession as a "permanent verbalisation", as Judith Butler puts it, "to constitute a truth of oneself through the act of verbalisation itself". Where his earlier version sees confession as self-containment,

relying on a repressive hypothesis and capitulating to the power and domination of pastoral power, Foucault's revised perspective equates verbalisation to self-sacrifice while stressing "the performative force of spoken utterance". We the audience, in the projected role of the confessor, then serve, as Butler propounds, to "facilitate a transition or conversion through the process of verbalisation, one that opens the self to interpretation and in effect, to a different kind of self-making in the wake of sacrifice". Certainly, in *Hitting (On) Women*, Yu's most deeply autobiographical work, the heroine reconstitutes her sense of self through that searingly painful confessional journey of memory reconstructions.

With Ovidia Yu, therefore, it is important to consider her work from the perspective of what Lisa Maria Hogeland calls "a kind of literacy, a way of reading both texts and everyday life from a particular stance" as well as a form of feminist writing that encapsulates the political process of resistance, in which "defiance is a component" (Cora Kaplan). With this publication of Yu's works, the Singapore dramatic canon is enriched by a corpus of texts that galvanises a need to revisit and re-envision critical frameworks and devise new aesthetic criteria by embodying the true spirit of women's studies, which has hitherto been confined to a study of women characters in the published works of Robert Yeo, Kuo Pao Kun, Tan Tarn How and Hareesh Sharma. The belated press of Yu's works necessitates evaluative strategies pertinent and applicable to women's texts. Yu's work represents what Showalter would call, in her delineation of the three stages of women's writing as a literary subgenre, as "female" as opposed to feminine or even feminist writing, though it does bear vestiges of the latter.

Yu, sprouting in the scene in the late 1980s as nascence rather

than renaissance of an earlier, heavily influential tradition, didn't feel the need to imitate prevailing modes of the dominant tradition unlike the acolytes of Kuo like Hareesh Sharma. There was therefore no need for feminine mimicry in compliance with the dominant discourse. By the same token, there was also no need to write back or write against this tradition of which she was no scion. Rather, Yu creates her own category of the female, the search of a female playwright for an identity universally identifiable yet uniquely her own.

Dr. K. K. Seet, 2011

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THE WOMAN IN A TREE  
ON THE HILL

**PRODUCTION NOTES**

*The Woman in a Tree on the Hill* was staged by TheatreWorks as part of its Theatre Carnival On the Hill season in April 1992. The play was directed by Ong Keng Sen and the stage manager was Maria Gotoking. The cast was as follows:

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WOMAN    Rosita Ng  
NARRATOR    Melvyn Chew

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*Woman is sitting in a tree throughout; preferably a highly stylised tree. In the first performance, she appeared on top of a paint-splattered step-ladder. When Nu Wa speaks, the faint sound of a Chinese flute is heard behind her words.*

- WOMAN I can hardly tell any more whether the waters are going up or coming down. It's so hard to tell. All this grey water and grey sky with no beginning and no end. Sometimes I think that all I can remember before this water came was a dream. A child's dream of blue skies and green grass and dry earth...
- NARRATOR Wife! Wife! Where art thou, my wife?
- WOMAN I'm up here, Noah! Hanging out the laundry on the boom!
- NARRATOR Wife, wife, canst thou see any sign of our winged messenger?
- WOMAN Sorry, Noah. Not a cheep. Looks like your bird's flown the coop good and proper. By the way, dear, I have some bad news...the mountain lions somehow got out of their pen on C Deck and got up onto B Deck with the ungulates and before anyone knew what was happening...
- NARRATOR Wife, wife, do not spare me the worst...
- WOMAN They killed the female unicorn. They ate her. All except her horn and four hoofs.
- NARRATOR Wife, wife, what a calamity...and what became of the male unicorn?
- WOMAN Well, he's upset, naturally. He's got a few scratches

- here and there, poor creature...and his horn is a little chipped at the tip but he'll live.
- NARRATOR *(to audience)* As anyone can tell you, a male unicorn without a female unicorn is no use when it comes to multiplying and filling the earth. *(back to wife)* Wife, wife, I charge thee, turn it upon a spit and we and all our house will feast this night...
- WOMAN *(to audience)* And you know who's going to have to do the dirty work, don't you? Yours truly...it's me that's going to have to clonk it on its pretty head and put a bolt through its pretty ear...and me that's going to have to carve through its flesh and hack through its bones...head, neck, best end of neck, sirloin, topside, tenderloin, forequarter, shin... Oh, birdie, you're back are you? Poor birdie, how tired you are. Your little wings are shaking, you can hardly stand. I wish the old man wouldn't keep sending you out, poor birdie...
- NARRATOR *(to audience)* Through the ages it has always been a woman's lot to be weary and to comfort the weary. *(to woman)* Nora, you're always too tired...
- WOMAN But Paul, I'm always so busy, Paul. There's always so much to be done...if only you didn't always throw your shirts onto the floor after you've tried them on and decided not to wear them...
- NARRATOR Nora, I resent the way you always manage to imply that I don't pull my weight around the house. You always do that. You never give me any credit for all the work I put in to support us in our standard of living!

WOMAN Paul, I never meant to imply—

NARRATOR I'm sorry, Nora. I've tried to make this marriage work, God knows I've tried. Even though my mother always said that no good would come out of marrying a girl without a university degree, I tried—

WOMAN Paul, Paul, what are you saying?

NARRATOR If you just listened to me instead of bleating off in a hundred different directions you would know what I'm trying to say.

WOMAN But Paul, I'm not sure if you—

NARRATOR Nora, I'm sorry. But we both know that this is over. There's no point in playing games any more, is there? Let's be...reasonable. Let's be...civilised adults. Let's be...friends.

WOMAN Friends! Paul, I'm sorry, I really don't understand...

NARRATOR I'm sure we can work everything out in a friendly way. I'm willing to do all I can to make things easier for you. I'm sure there are some things that you'll want to take with you...those dried flower arrangements you made in your flower arranging classes, for instance.

WOMAN Oh Paul, I always knew you hated them. Why didn't you say so sooner? I'll take them down! I'll throw them away! You'll never have to look at them again! I'll never go for another flower arranging class...but you said it was all right! I asked you if you minded me going and you said it was all right...

NARRATOR Nora, you're getting hysterical. Please get a hold of

yourself. Look, all I want you to do is sign this little piece of paper...

WOMAN No, Paul, no! Please—

NARRATOR No? Nora, you're being silly again.

WOMAN Paul, the children...

NARRATOR Yes, you'll have to think of something to tell the children...We can talk about it after you've signed this...

WOMAN But Paul, this is so sudden...

NARRATOR No it's not. I've been thinking about it for a long time.

WOMAN But what will everybody think? We've always been so happy together...

NARRATOR It doesn't matter what everybody thinks.

WOMAN Paul...I don't know what's happening. Paul, why are you doing this to me?

NARRATOR Look, Nora, I'm not doing anything to you. I'm just trying to free the both of us. So that we can find new lives for ourselves.

WOMAN But I'm happy. I've always been happy. I thought you were happy too.

NARRATOR It just goes to show how little you know me, doesn't it? And you're not really happy. You're just stuck in a rut where you don't realise that you're unhappy because you don't think about it. Maureen says that—

WOMAN Maureen.

NARRATOR Maureen was just giving me a little advice. We went out for a drink. Just to talk. It's nothing. She's a good friend. She likes you. She told me so.

WOMAN Maureen.

NARRATOR She's trying to help me work all this out, that's all. Maureen's always liked you, you know. She's always telling me that I should try to see your point of view. She's always trying to help me see your point of view.

WOMAN Maureen.

NARRATOR You know what we discovered? We discovered that your real problem is that you don't have a point of view!

WOMAN Paul. How could you discuss me with Maureen?

NARRATOR Look, Nora. Don't say anything about Maureen. She's a very nice girl. You know she's a very nice girl.

WOMAN Paul. Have you slept with her?

NARRATOR Look, what kind of question is that? I consider that a question in very bad taste. Nora, I don't know what kind of mind you have. I hate to think of you talking this way in front of the children.

WOMAN What are you going to tell the children?

NARRATOR Well...I thought you would want to come up with something. You're good at that sort of thing. Anyway, you're the one that's leaving. I don't think it's necessary to bother them with too many details, do you?

WOMAN I'm leaving? Where am I going?

NARRATOR Wherever you want.

WOMAN I—I want to stay here.

NARRATOR Nora, you don't seem to understand...I said you're free to go anywhere you want. Besides you can't stay here. I'm keeping the house. It's all here in

writing. You can read through your copy after you've signed it. Nora, where are you going? Nora, Nora, don't be such an idiot! Nora, get down from that tree! Nora, the neighbours will see you!  
*Woman sits serenely up in the tree, looking off into the distance.*

NARRATOR All right, Nora. You win. We'll talk about it. I said all right, Nora. You win. You can have your lawyer look at this before you sign. Nora! Stop making a fool of yourself. Come on down. Nora, the children will be home soon. Do you want them to see you acting like this? Nora, I want you to know that I think you're behaving in a ridiculous, childish fashion!  
*Narrator stamps his feet in a childish tantrum.*

NARRATOR *(to audience)* Have you ever noticed that sometimes men and women don't see things in exactly the same way? But there was once a woman who could, because she was both man and woman. *(Sage Chinese accent)* This woman is Nu Wa.

WOMAN I was created of Nu and Wa, the sister and brother whose union marks the beginnings of the human race.

NARRATOR *(Chinese accent)* She is sometimes described as having a human head but the body of a snake or fish. Bizarre.

WOMAN Having the head of one species and the body of another may sound bizarre to you, but if you think about it with the Chinese part of your brain, it will be easier for you to understand. You see, it is very

difficult to imagine a goddess with bound feet. Can you see me as a two-year old goddess held down on a bed with cotton in my mouth to gag my screams while my foot is bent inwards into itself until the tender arch snaps and breaks? And can you see me, lovely ephemeral creature that I am, unwinding the stinking bandages from my feet once a week, to squeeze out the pus and cut away the dying flesh? But for many years, you couldn't be a lady without bound feet, and can you imagine a goddess that isn't also a lady? So, the solution... if you have the body of a snake or fish you can still have a beautiful face and be a lady without having bound feet.

NARRATOR (*Chinese accent*) Nu Wa is the goddess of marriage and the patroness of matchmakers.

WOMAN Well, somebody had to do it. What few women realise and fewer women take advantage of, is the fact that it is I, Nu Wa, a woman, who first laid down the perimeters of marriage. And what too few women realise too late is that marriage is best considered as a business venture. What do you hope to get out of marriage, little girl?

NARRATOR (*little girl*) Live happily ever after. Like in the books I read. Like *Snow White* and *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Cinderella*.

WOMAN What do you hope to get out of marriage, young woman?

NARRATOR (*young woman*) I'm not a dreamer. I know I'll have to work hard (*launches into aerobics*) and do my

share, but I will. We will live happily ever after. It will be a fairy tale ending but realistic. Like in the books I read. Like in Judith Krantz and Barbara Bradford Taylor.

WOMAN And what do you hope to get out of marriage, young man?

NARRATOR (*young man*) Well, I never thought much about—

WOMAN But what about all the fairy tales you've been told, all the books you've read, telling you how you're going to live happily ever after?

NARRATOR (*young man*) I don't really read much...but hey, I like *The Far Side*. Gary Larson, he's my kind of writer. Have you seen the one where the huge net comes out of the sky and swoops this woman up and her husband says—

WOMAN Stop. You can't quote that on stage without copyright permission. But if you do decide to get married, what do you hope your wife will be like, young man?

NARRATOR (*young man*) Oh, that. Someone like my mum, of course. Someone who loves me, who will be faithful to me, who will take care of my children, who will take care of...

WOMAN All your cats and dogs and rabbits and pelicans and ostriches and caymans and root rats and three-toed frogs and miniature pork bellies! My mother warned me, but did I listen? No, I did not. No, not me. No...Oh! Oh! Ooooooooooh!

NARRATOR (*Noah*) Wife, wife, what aileth thee? Hast thou been bitten, pecked, scratched or clawed by one

of the creatures given into our care?

WOMAN No—no—Noah, it's the bird, the bird's back!

NARRATOR I knew the creature would return...as long as he findeth not a perch upon which to rest his weary wi—

WOMAN It's so beautiful...oh, Noah, it's so beautiful...  
Noah, it's so green...I'd almost forgotten what fresh green looked like...Noah, my husband, my love, my lord, look at this twig the bird brought back. Look at the leaves. The first leaves of the first tree on the first hill...

NARRATOR *(to audience)* Paradise may be regained. But it's not the same. The fault, it is possible, lies not in the quality of the paradise but in the person returning. *(to woman)* Wife! Wife! Why hast thou vanished from my sight?

WOMAN I'm up here, Noah, my love. In my tree.

NARRATOR Wife, wife, I cannot understand what it is that ails thee, that thou spendeth thy sweetest hours within the lofty reaches of this tree that standeth so awkwardly upon land ripe for development.

WOMAN Noah, we've been over this a hundred times before. No, you are not going to cut down this tree. I know you. You just want to build one more of your factories or another of those multi-storey shopping centres!

NARRATOR Wife, wife, standeth thou in the path of progress?

WOMAN No, Noah. I sitteth in a tree. And I intend that there should be at least this one tree for me to continue "sitteth-ing" in! Noah, dear husband,

don't you remember this tree? Don't you remember how excited, how happy, how wonderful we felt when that bird came back to us with a twig in its beak? Remember how the live wood felt, after all that time in an ark of dead timber? And remember how we saw this tree, the first leaf, the first stem, the first branch...Noah, the first tree on the first hill where we knew, where we absolutely knew for the first time that it was all over and we were beginning our new life?

NARRATOR Wife, wife, how you chatter. I have matters of greater importance to attend to. *(to audience)* There are always matters of great importance to be attended to.

*Narrator mimes a graceful swing and upstroke with an imaginary golf club.*

NARRATOR When Nu Wa created Man, she considered it a matter of utmost importance.

WOMAN Some of the time. Some men were carefully made, delicately fashioned out of earth with care, with love, with attention. Other men were created by dragging a string through mud. Without looking too closely at them, you can already tell the difference. You!

NARRATOR Yes, my lady.

WOMAN What have you got there?

NARRATOR It is a giant ox, my lady. It is destroying our fields and our huts and eating our crops and our stores. There has never been an ox like this and there is nothing that anyone can do about it.

On *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*  
Winner of the Edinburgh Fringe First Award and  
the Scottish Daily Express New Names of 1993 Award

“This production’s strength is...in the details.  
Touching and very brilliant.”

– Jeremy Samuel, *The Flying Inkpot*

“A quality production.”

– *The Business Times*

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On *Three Fat Virgins*

“Ovidia Yu’s light and witty comedy is (juxtaposed with) dark  
undercurrents of frustration, claustrophobia  
and hopelessness...”

– Kenneth Kwok, *The Flying Inkpot*

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On *Hitting (On) Women*

Winner of Best Script, 2008 *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards

“Hitting (On) Women is a well-crafted play that gives  
an intimate examination of the knotted, entangled lives  
of two women.”

– *The Business Times*

“Timely...and well-played.”

– Richard Chua, *TheatreX Asia*

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On *The Silence of the Kittens*

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