

## **12 Storeys**

by

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**Abstract:** This paper is a critical appreciation of the film "12 Storeys" directed by local filmmaker Eric Khoo that depicts the quiet desperation and alienation suffered by three groups of Singaporeans living in the same HDB block. This reflection of the inadequacy of the Singaporean dream is an important step towards the realization that, while we enjoy economic success, there are grave social problems that merit examination. This paper aims to analyze *12 Storeys* and how it depicts the isolation suffered by various Singaporeans despite living in close proximity and how this sense of isolation is relevant in today's society.

Eric Khoo opens *12 Storeys* with a montage of different scenes around a residential estate, followed by the suicide of a disaffected person who jumps off the twelfth storey of the Housing Development Board (HDB) flat where he stays in. The ghost of this man then brings us through the lives and relationships of three different families living in the same block of flats. This wandering ghost is the only connecting arc between the three families, as a silent bystander, depicting the alienation that the families experience.

The first of the three families, Meng and his two siblings, Trixi and Tee, tells a story of an overprotective and authoritative brother who is in charge of his two younger siblings while their parents are away. Meng shows the aggravation and desolation that stems from a man dealing with his own inadequacy. The two younger siblings, rebellious and

obstinate, represent the younger generation, bored rigid from the comfort and security of the peacefulness in Singapore. The beginning shows a rather peaceful family, but the peacefulness is obliterated when Meng realizes that Trixi is not as innocent and pure as he hoped she is. Trixi's open-mindedness with sexuality and Meng's notion of keeping one's virginity till marriage are at loggerheads. As Meng forces his perceptions onto Trixi, the peaceful family is reduced to nothing. Meng could not handle the astonishing revelation that Trixi has had many sex partners and found it impossible to swallow. The blow was too strong for him and when he realized he did not live up to the traditional Chinese expectations as the eldest son in the family, he finally went berserk.

The second story revolves around Ah Gu and his wife, Lily, from China. Ah Gu is an unattractive, middle-aged hawker, submissive to his beautiful wife. Lily was unprepared to discover that Ah Gu was not the rich, successful businessman he described himself out to be. Similarly, Ah Gu never expected Lily to be a gold-digger and uncommitted in their marriage. Lily has every imaginable characteristic that Singaporeans deem Chinese brides to have: greedy, flirtatious and bitchy. Her comments about Singapore are severe. She offers us a platform to reflect about the way ugly Singaporeans portray

themselves and the difficulties that foreigners face when settling down in Singapore. This story also shows a different side of the issue of foreign brides. Many people deem it the foreign brides' fault when marriages go wrong and the bride runs off. What many do not seem to take into consideration is that the men could have lied about their social status, as in Ah Gu's case.

The third story involves a corpulent woman and her imagination of her deceased foster mother. Sansan has no self-esteem and feels like a failure and a burden to society. She lives under the control of her nagging foster mother, and she can still feel the nagging presence even after her foster mother passed away. Sansan's despondency finds its roots from her mother's verbal abuse about how incompetent and useless she is. Sansan's mother never did hold back her acid tongue and has no queries on ranting about Sansan's dressing, looks, incapability and hopelessness. One cannot help but empathize with Sansan and pity her for her loneliness and how she is unable to step out of her late mother's incessant nagging.

Each story is distinct, different from the others, but oddly similar in the underlying message of desperation and alienation that they are trying to bring across to the audience. The film showcases problems

that led to the befuddled repression and callous complacency about the things treasured in life and the anguish that one can feel when wallowed in inferiority and lonesomeness. Khoo intercuts between these three stories, showing how they all happen simultaneously, in the same block of flats, yet so distant from one another, structuring a distressing image that spoils the idealistic portrayal of the Confucian society that the government aims to achieve.

From the suicide of the young man, unknown to the neighbours who found him, to Lily's longing to return to China and the deep regret she holds for coming to Singapore in the hope of a better life, *12 Storeys* brings across a strong message, that these neighbours all live in their own world, oblivious to the happenings around them. In fact, other than the coffee-shop banter that happens between shots, Meng's passing chat with a Malay neighbour, promising that he would provide tuition for his son and the ghost of the young man, there is no communication and connection amongst the neighbours.

A decade has passed since the film was made. However, this problem of alienation in a neighbourhood is still significant in today's society. In a recent Sunday Times poll, 61% of respondents said that conversations with their neighbours did not go beyond casual

greetings. Stresses in daily life are weakening our social fabric further than it already is.

With longer working and schooling hours, higher stress levels due to increasing burdens, the advancement of technological devices and modern gadgets and the increase in the number of entertainment facilities, many Singaporeans are more than contented to just keep within the comfort of their own homes. This greatly reduces the interaction between neighbours since all doors are closed. In *12 Storeys*, this type of Singaporean is depicted by Meng's family. Meng is a classic example of a person who goes straight home after work and enjoys his free time in front of a television set, contented with not having to step out of the house for entertainment. Trixi and Tee are the direct opposites. They find entertainment at arcades, pubs and shopping centres, preferring to enjoy themselves away from home.

The issue on foreigners living in Singapore is a pressing one. With globalization rapidly on the rise, foreigners, talents or not, are coming to Singapore to work, to study, and to live. Being new to Singapore, they will want to feel welcomed so that they can settle down and blend into our society more easily. In *12 Storeys*, Lily was not lucky enough to get good, friendly neighbours. She could only rely on herself

and her friends from China to get used to Singapore. Her awkwardness in the place she lives in is introduced to the audience through the coffee-shop banter when a few men mocked her for being a China bride. This could have been avoided if there were more interactions among the neighbours. They will each be able to learn more about the other's culture and traditions. The newcomers will also be able to build strong social networks and prevent probable misapprehensions and tensions.

Maintaining healthy social communication amongst neighbours helps avert isolation and alienation. It can also improve a person's physical and mental well-being. A strong communal support network will be of immense help in times of need. Neighbours should find opportunities to know one another better and forge better relationships, so that they can help one another in times of distress. Sansan, being introverted, does not dare talk to her neighbours. The only companions she had were her imagination of her mother and the ghostly presence of the young man, both of which she cannot feel the physical presence. If Sansan had the companionship of neighbours to help her tide over the misery of having lost her one and only family member and to bring her out of her own shell, Sansan would have been a much happier person.

The government has put in a lot of effort to solve the problem of alienation in Singapore neighbourhoods. There is a dire need to increase interaction among neighbours so that they can meet people of different backgrounds, race and religion. In a multiracial society like Singapore, cohesion in a community is very much emphasized, so as to prevent any potential racial riots and unrest.

The process of bringing neighbours together to build a more cohesive and friendly neighbourhood is a never-ending one. The Peoples' Association's Workplan Seminar 2008 focuses on the concept of "Neighbourliness". During the seminar, activities, such as forming interest groups for people living in one another's vicinity, were raised. Residents' Committees, whose key objective is to promote neighbourliness and neighborhood cohesiveness among the residents through various activities, have been around for many years.

The film ends off with the ghost of the young man providing comfort to Sansan. This small act of care and concern would have made a greater impact if the young man was alive. It would have been a first step in nurturing a more neighbourly environment. With a final shot of the neighbourhood, the film comes to a close without actually solving the conflicts introduced. This leaves the audience to

reflect - has the pursuit of economic development sacrificed too much human warmth and friendliness such that we are now living in a concrete jungle?

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