

The Theme of Love

Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew

Rosalyn Puthuchery. *The Tessellated Path*. Singapore: Select Books, 2009. 240 pages. ISBN 9789814022552.

Malaysian-born Rosalyn Puthuchery started writing poetry in her teens. Her first poem "The Drain" appeared in *The Singapore Standard* in 1952 while her first short story, "The Even Song", was published in *The Young Malaysians* in 1956. Her first volume of poetry, *Pillow Your Dreams*, was published in 1978 with the second volume, *The Fragmented Ego*, coming out in 1978 and the third, *Dance on His Doorstep* in 1992. Puthuchery received her doctorate in English Literature from the National University of Singapore in 2006 and since then has written three volumes of poetry: *Mirrored Images* (2008), *Harvest of Morning Flowers* (2008), and *Footfalls in the Rain* (2008), bringing her to the attention of Singapore's literary circles. *The Tessellated Path* is her first novel.

Set against the background of Singapore's struggle for independence, the narrative explores the notion of predestination. Determined to live a life far removed from that of her mother and grandmother, the protagonist, Lisa, sets off on her own to discover a life beyond her comfort zone. In this journey of discovery, she is wrenched from her traditional mode of thinking as she confronts betrayal, homosexuality, wife-battering, murder, suicide, fraud and lechery.

In *The Tessellated Path*, Puthuchery has constructed an engrossing tale with allusions to the myths and legends of this region. The Vedic astrological sign, the Dragon's Tail, which hangs like a hostile force over the protagonist, becomes a metaphor for the unknown forces she must encounter to finally reach her destiny. The dominant theme that runs throughout the book is the vivid portrayal of the internal landscape of the mind. The book's strength lies in the fact that it is so intently and richly focused; just as its weakness, if we must find one, lies in the fact that its potentially rich contextual background pales into insignificance as a result.

In *The Tessellated Path*, the soul is searching for its soulmate and this soulmate is to be looked for mainly in the dimension of the material world, despite occasional skirmishes with the realm of the sacred to seek for answers. Lisa, the main protagonist, first discovers her soulmate in Kim, whose constant presence is meticulously interwoven into the later chapters of the book as well. Lisa subsequently meets another possible suitor, Meng, who is very different and slightly effeminate and eventually the navy officer whom she will marry, Krish, who is quite a different kettle of fish altogether.

This book offers a rather unusual ethnography of male-female relationships as seen through the eyes of Lisa. The love affairs of Lisa's contemporaries are foregrounded, such as Sumi and Imran's, Andre and Mei's, Tony and Judy's, Peck and Peter's, Gary and Suyin's and Suyin and Ray's. Their relationships emerge from different variables of personalities and the subtle shades and differing dynamics provide the knowledge-seeking Lisa with an opportunity to observe and learn firsthand from those around her.

The essential questions are: Does love destroy us or do we destroy love? Is love a figment of one's imagination? Are we essentially mind or are we body? Is marriage merely companionship? Or is it centrally a question of compatibility? Must it be something that should lift each companionate soul to greater heights? Lisa's passionate love for Ben, a thinly fleshed-out elusive character in the book, helps to propel these fiery questions to the foreground. With Ben, her question is: Am I caught in a bewitchment from which there is no escape?

Lisa is only able to find the answers to some of these questions, one of which emerges from her failed marriage i.e. "without trust, sex is not enough to keep a relationship going." From the ill-fated relationship between Judy and Tony which ends in a suicidal lover's pact, Lisa resolves: "I will not let my yearning destroy me." Popular wisdom occasionally surfaces as well, for example: "How do we know whether it is the right chemistry?" The answer: "Just kiss him, if it tastes good it's right." At the end, an older, more resilient Lisa draws strength from a cultivated asceticism: "I'm a woman who fasts until I'm served with what I crave for." Girl talk abounds as a form of folk wisdom in the narrative. In her talk with Mei in the concluding chapter, Lisa clarifies many soul-searching questions on love – a section which will be fascinating for "relationship" aficionados but certainly not for skeptics.

The novel is interspersed with poetic reflections as seen from the vivid descriptions of the surrounding landscape which corresponds with the emotions of the human heart. Lisa is probably someone middle-aged in view of the numerous historical flashbacks in the novel. The novel is also quite likely a thinly-veiled autobiographical account and this becomes obvious in the occasional lapses into the first person, when the third person narrator has been used all along. Also noteworthy is that while the narration of Kim and Meng takes place unawares and measurably, Krish's emergence is unexpected and sudden, and the reader is caught by the announcement that Lisa is now "safely married."

The context within which the novel is embedded is potentially rich but the sense is that it has not been explored enough. The events take place in dynamic and cosmopolitan Singapore in the tumultuous years of early nation building, i.e. the 1950s through to the 1970s. These were the early days of the People's Action Party and Singapore and Malaysia were then multicultural societies which had not yet transformed into more racially-conscious and materialistic ones of today. There

are the periodic flashbacks to the forgotten significance of the Hock Lee bus riots, the Fajar trial, the closure of the *Eastern Sun* and the *Singapore Herald* and how the PAP is the only party represented in Singapore after the 1968 elections. The book offers historical moments which shaped the development of Singapore from its status as a British Crown Colony to an independent nation and therefore it has potential interest for historians and social commentators.

Another interesting dimension that has not been explored enough is the lives of Lisa's mother and grandmother in Malaysia. A richly layered Malaysian heritage prevails: Lisa's grandmother is a Syrian Catholic, her mother is from Kerala and her father is Malayali. While her mother learns to write on the sand in the courtyard of her house in Kerala, Lisa goes to university to read literature and political science. While her grandmother was matched to a man 26 years older than herself, being the best that her father could do for her since "her skin was not as light as her sister," Lisa enjoys intellectual and sexual freedom hitherto unknown to her women ancestors. Celibacy outside marriage stops with Lisa and the generation gap is startling. Lisa reflects on the gap: "They just think that because I'm a woman I'll just give in. What she doesn't realize is those women today don't have to endure a marriage they don't want, unlike her time." Perhaps these differences in the lives of the women could have been fleshed-out to give added depth to the book and to allow the reader space away from the rather particularized mindscape of Lisa.

The novel concludes with Lisa falling into another inviting sleep. This time she escapes from her *tessellations* into the idealized and romantic company of Rama and Seetha, characters in the Hindu epic, *Ramayana*, sharing a happy life together. Perhaps we may grant Lisa this license because to be human is to yearn forever for something indefinite, unknown and beyond. However, something definite that we can learn from *The Tessellated Path* is that everything can be resolved. The tessellations will eventually gather themselves into perfect patterns because: "Where there is love, nothing is too much trouble, and there is always time."