

Shih-Li Kow, *The Sum of Our Follies*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2014. 239 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-47-9.

Shih-Li Kow's *The Sum of Our Follies* is such an interesting read, a page turner which pulls the reader into a world which is at once particular and universal. The particularity of the world of Lubok Sayong, a fictional town located in Perak, emerges from its distinct topography, and its intriguing inhabitants. There are so many details of place and people given in the narrative that one could easily believe that such a town really exists in Malaysia. Lubok Sayong is a typical Malaysian small town. And yet, the human emotions played out in this particular place point towards a complexity that encapsulates something larger. This novel talks about the small towns the world over struggling to survive in an increasingly modern, global context. The seamlessness of the overlap between distinct and universal in the novel is testament to the author's skill and sensitivity.

Right from the start, we are asked to take note of the town of Lubok Sayong and the novel begins with its description:

Lubok Sayong has a problem with water; there's simply too much of it. Our town sits in a saucer-shaped depression, sunk into a valley with the Perak River on one side and a tributary of the Sayong on another. The rivers hug Lubok Sayong against the foothills of a mountain range that runs like a spine along the peninsula. (6)

Indeed it would not be too far from the truth to say that the town of Lubok Sayong is the main character in the novel and the intention of the narrative is to capture the flow and rhythm of life in a small town. Hence the pace in *The Sum of Our Follies* is slow and deliberate, reflective of a fairly quiet community engaged in the everyday routine of life. There is little drama here, the highlights being the annual floods and an unfortunate episode when a fish attacks a tourist. The inner lives and relationships of the townspeople, however, are a different story. We are introduced to an array of people, both young and old and much of the excitement comes from their relations with each other. There is the Chinese man Auyong, a kindly man who manages a lychee factory, the fierce and opinionated Beevi who runs a homestay, Mary Ann who is sweet and has the most interesting thoughts, the handsome Ismet who is a tradesman and an artist, Miss Boonsidik, a transgender with a caring heart, etc. They all possess "the quirks of small town folk" (15) which city dwellers cannot quite comprehend.

But like small towns everywhere, Lubok Sayong cannot isolate itself from the outside world. A stream of visitors pass through this town for different

reasons and they are mostly unwelcome. There are the concerned folk from the cities who offer help during the floods: “In truth, many of us preferred the lazy help of the police and fire department. With them, we shared the companionship of quiet waiting and a patient tolerance of inefficiency” (16). There are the political parties which drag themselves to the town, courting votes. Then there are the tourists who are charmed by the quaintness of small places and its people, “evolutionary collateral damage, soon to disappear” (92).

Here it is pertinent to note that Shih-Li Kow’s writing is all the more engaging because it is laced with liberal doses of humour. Though the novel is replete with local references and issues which most Malaysian readers will immediately identify, the funny situations the characters find themselves in and their own curious natures would appeal to any reader with an eye for the idiosyncrasies in human nature.

Noteworthy is the fact that the two narrators in the novel, Auyong and Mary Ann, are “outsiders,” folk from Kuala Lumpur who have come to claim Lubok Sayong as home. Various circumstances bring them to the town. Auyong wants to flee from harried city life: “The hypermarket I used to manage back in those days in the city had more people passing through its checkout lines daily than the entire population of Lubok Sayong” (91). But he goes on to say, “In the last quarter of my time on earth... there was much comfort in being addressed by name by familiar faces” (91). Mary Ann is brought by her adopted parents to live here. Sad and confused at first, Mary Ann grows to be protective of her little town. Once, when her best friend tells her that Kuchai Lama in Kuala Lumpur is like a small town, the young girl’s response, though not complimentary on the surface, belies her love for her hometown: “No, it’s nothing like a small town. Everyone’s fighting here, moving fast, not drugged out on boredom like in Lubok Sayong” (157). Together, the voices of the elderly Chinese man and the young Eurasian girl, depict the singular delights of living in a small town and the importance of keeping alive “the spirit of place,” to quote D.H. Lawrence.

Having two narrators separately recounting the same events gives a layered and multiple perspective in the novel. Added to that, the narrators are of different races and this builds into the communal and multiracial thread in the narrative. Though there are the occasional prejudices (Beevi is unsure of the Chinese side of her family), the different races in this small town share an enviable solidarity. A sense of community prevails especially in trying times. Friendships cross racial boundaries and despite differences, a genuine feeling of caring persists. In the many subtle, and not so subtle, messages that the author hints at in the novel involving current issues in Malaysia, this is perhaps for me, the most important one. The author is aware of differences in race and culture which rigidly categorise people but she chooses to portray her characters with

sympathy and humour because, as Auyong says in the very last line of the novel, “we are only the sum of our follies, told and untold” (239).

Many Malaysian authors, writing from home and abroad, are intrigued with historical happenings like the Japanese Occupation, British rule, and the May 13th incident which have shaped the story of Malaysia. Shih-Li Kow picks a contemporary story: a small town in danger of being swallowed up by modernisation. This too is an important story to tell. If we are not careful, the small places of the world will slowly disappear and that would be an utter shame.

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