

My Burning Hill  
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# MY BURNING HILL

Rosaly Puthucheary



*A tribute to the memory  
of my brother James Puthucheary.*

# Preface

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*My Burning Hill* is a long poem in fifty-six sequences. The persona, the voice the reader hears is burdened by his role in the making of Singapore.

Using free verse, the persona creates some uncertainty in the reader by using a feature common in Dramatic Monologue. However unlike Browning, the poet uses unsustained sequences. The speech rhythm throughout the poem reinforces the idea that the persona is possibly talking to someone. This certainty becomes visible by the use of “you” and the questions directed at the listener.

The questions prompt an introspection which is in present tense. Each sequence is self-contained. However, it is through the disorientation produced by the abrupt and unpredictable shifts of register from one sequence to another that the angst within the persona is manifested.

The persona engages in a shifting perspective moving from one historical reference to another, from one event to another to give a collective impression of his role in the making of Singapore. By recording both the pleasant and the unpleasant events the poet is able to capture the fire, the

intensity of those who fought for political independence.

The final impact is that the poet is not trying to achieve a total description of history but is creating a poetic construct, where the phrasing is tense with intensity. The discreet play on words and semantics which produce shifts in meaning is juxtaposed with direct natural speech which acts as a web to hold the sequences together.

Within the meditative mode the poet cites and alludes to the politics of Singapore, its cultural and racial diversity. What makes the sequences interesting are the process of allusions which demands intellectual engagement of the reader. The poem thus becomes a testimony of a political detainee who played a role in the fight for political independence of Singapore.

Rosalyn Puthuchery  
2011

## VIII

How could the Brits let the island down?  
A question in almost every mouth.  
Their people with suitcases  
gathered in the wind-blown Padang.  
Wide-eyed the people of the colony  
watched the icon of supremacy  
crumple in the blazing sun.  
Blistered feet trudged  
on the glister of tarred road.  
Miles of debris littered  
the road to Changi Prison.

## IX

The edict from Yamashita  
forced the Chinese to assemble  
like uniformed pupils  
before the flag of the Rising Sun.  
They hung their heads down,  
waited in the sweltering heat  
under the glass-blue sky.  
Mothers with children crouched  
on the hardened earth  
for three days and nights.  
They listened to speeches  
vibrating in still air.  
Terrified by alien sounds  
tremours tumbled down their spine.  
Males dug graves. Females had their hands  
stamped like cattle on the ranch.  
Herded out, the women escaped  
to burn joss-sticks for their men.

## XIV

I was the mandore, the platoon leader  
watching my men turn into orderlies  
for the warring muscle  
of the Rising Sun.  
The battle at Impal was lost  
first to the British, then to the monsoon.  
Torrents tearing down drove us to Rangoon.  
One by one my men died  
from starvation, from exhaustion.  
I stood alone, more dead than alive,  
cradling the last of my freedom fighters  
fighting his last.  
You may well ask,  
what was it all about?  
Why this sacrifice?  
So many young lives wasted.  
But I learnt to survive  
up on the still burning hill.

## XV

You look amazed. Yes I did fight  
in the frontline. We were soldiers.  
Am I an avatar? Hardly. A wide-eyed youth.  
My freedom fighters were heroes.  
Each died in my arms,  
their will broken, their dreams shattered.  
They were too weak to live,  
to struggle up the still burning hill  
without food and water,  
fend off snakes with venom,  
pluck out leeches from their skin.  
The planes above hounded  
while the burning waters glistened.