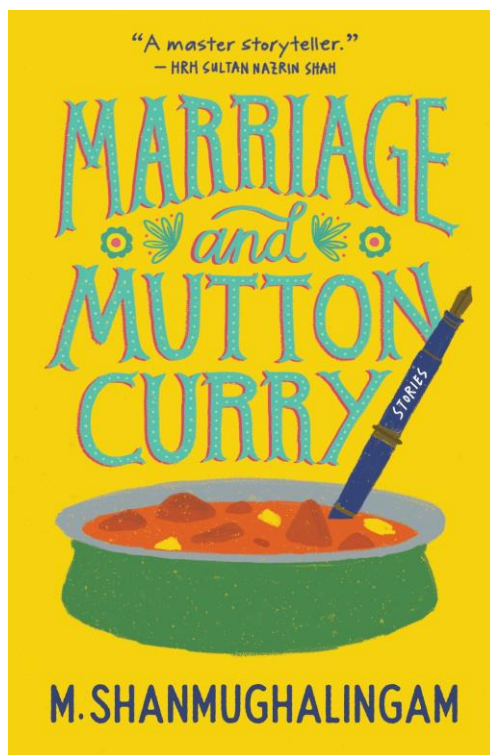


M. Shanmughalingam, *Marriage and Mutton Curry*. Singapore: Epigram, 2018. 232 pp. ISBN 9789810756222.



Marriage and Mutton Curry is a collection of fifteen stories, but it's more than that. Like R.K. Narayan's Malgudi books and V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, it's a portrait of a community – in this case the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Malaya from the time of the Japanese occupation in World War Two to *Merdeka* – independence – in the late 1950s. Characters and themes cross the borders of these stories – a minor character in one story becomes the main character of another. However, taking warning from the riotously hilarious “Naming Names,” it is probably not always safe to assume that Mrs Kandiah in one story is necessarily the same as Mrs Kandiah in another, just because they share a name. “The proliferation of Kandiahs, Kandayahs, Kandasamys, Kanagalingams, Kanagaratnams, Kanagasabais, Kanagupeiars and many other names was to become the source of much creative activity within the Malayan Jaffna Tamil community” (80), as our narrator gleefully relates.

The baroque exuberance of a story – or essay – like “Naming Names” throws into stark relief the grimness of some other stories. The collection is carefully structured and ordered: although the stories can stand alone, they follow a roughly chronological order and there is a kind of implicit narrative arc. Sometimes dark and light are mingled in the same story. The first two, “Victoria and her Kimono” and “Half and Half,” for example, are light-hearted in tone. The characters confront the mortal danger of the Japanese occupation with a kind of cheery bravado which, by its very incongruity, highlights the fragility of their way of life and, by extension, the human condition in a time of conflict. In both stories, characters outwit the enemy with intelligence, imagination and clever tactics. Perhaps not coincidentally, they both involve the protagonists demonstrating a knowledge of, interest in, and affinity for Japanese culture which eventually tends to disarm the threatening brutality of the invaders, humanising them.

The third story, “Birthday,” one of the shortest in the book, is the first of several dealing with the themes of family relations – and the ingrained sexism of the community which believes in “the virtues of women who bear sons” (43) – with humour, irony and a feather-light touch which glosses over the darkness at the core of this inequitable society. The next sequence of stories deals with the masculine world of the civil service: both Malaysians and international visitors embarrassing themselves or being outwitted in their dealings with each other; and in one case a civil servant’s mother mortifying both herself and her son by indiscreet boasting. The humour is broad and the denouements crushing.

Later stories, however, do not hold back from plumbing the murky depths of a society where inflexible misogyny can lead to thwarted and tormented lives. Starting at the centre-point of the collection, there is a suite of five substantial and increasingly powerful stories about marriage.

The first is a rather sweet – or bittersweet – tale of a young man, “The Barefoot Man from Malaya,” who comes courting a young woman in northern Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Despite his unorthodox and direct approach, Kandasamy carries Ramasah off to Malaya with her family’s blessing. The story ends with a note of regret as the ship leaves the dock and Ramasah realises “that there was now no turning back” (118). Not content to leave this “happy ever after – perhaps” ending unresolved, the title story, “Marriage and Mutton Curry,” follows this couple into their troubled marriage. The workaholic husband refuses to let his wife work – all his fund of unconventionality apparently having been consumed in the boldness of his marriage proposal – and Ramasah’s ambitions to be a teacher are squashed. They never leave Kuala Lumpur, they argue and even Ramasah’s friendship with her neighbour Mrs Chellapah is tainted with suspicion and reproach. There is no sentimentality here at all: compassion, yes, but clear-eyed candour about the way the husband’s repression is passed on to

the wife and through her to her unfortunate friend, who is trapped in an even worse marriage, beset by domestic violence.

Fast-forward twenty years to “Dodol for the Doctor,” and Ramasah is trying to catch a coveted doctor-husband for her daughter, while dreading the approaching enforced retirement of her Kandasamy:

After all these years I'm used to having the house to myself. I have no idea what it will be like to have both of us here all the time.... Oh, Lord Ganesha, every day! And no work, no files, no letters. He will be like a jungle tiger prowling around looking for his dinner! (145)

Ramasah's life and ambitions have narrowed by now. She still has itchy feet – she still wants to travel – but getting her daughter married well is a higher priority. She still has her neighbour to bully and boss around, and it is perhaps with a slight sense of satisfaction that we learn that Mrs Chellapah may have found a way of getting revenge on the rather abrasive and unpleasant woman Ramasah has become.

This set of three stories about the Kandasamy-Ramasah marriage takes up more than one-quarter of the book's pages. Although serious and thought-provoking, they are still quite comic in tone. The next two stories, “Flowers for KK” and its sequel “The Indra Quartet” take us into much darker territory from the very start: “I have been dying inside for eight years.” Indra's husband has just died prematurely (but unregretted), leaving an unthinkable situation: two wives, two sisters, each the mother of one of his children.

Indra is Kanagaretnam's first wife, but as several years of marriage have produced no child, “KK” has decreed that he will take Indra's younger sister, Thangachi, as a second wife, blaming Indra's infertility and “bad karma” for this unfortunate development, and citing extensive cultural precedents to justify his decision – “raising his voice, which he did whenever his argument was weak” (162). He dies suddenly when the two children, one a boy and one a girl, are still virtually newborns.

While Ramasah has managed to attain some kind of grudging acceptance of her lot, Indra is thoroughly embittered and her revenge on her fellow widowed sister is thoroughly nasty. Like the third story in the other sequence, the second story revisits this household of four – “The Indra Quartet” – at the time the children are reaching adulthood and the poisonous situation Indra has engineered is threatening to turn against her. These two stories are only half the length of the previous set of three, but they are the ones that will stay with me most vividly, recalled with a horrified shudder. They are black, but with little comedy: the torment Indra visits on her family is visited no less on herself: she is unforgiving and seems likely to be unforgiven.

The last two stories confront head-on, but with a lighter touch, the way the rigid morality of this community is policed by over-zealous middle-aged women. It's hinted that their own unhappiness fuels their outrage at any kind of irregular behaviour among the unmarried young. "Free and Freed" follows the same pattern as many of the other stories in this collection: a person of strong and freely expressed prejudices unabashedly makes a complete turnaround when her preconceptions are proved wrong. But finally, in the charming story, "Rani Taxis Away," Shanmughalingam leaves us with the hope that the self-perpetuating repression of this society, full of cruelty and hypocrisy and completely lacking in respect for other peoples' privacy and autonomy, might be resisted, with grace and good humour. In a nice balance to the thwarted ambitions of Ramasah, it is Rani's teaching job which gives her confidence to transcend her society's rigid morality.

This book is full of delights and surprises. Just as you are thinking that the stories might be falling into a particular pattern, the mould is broken and a different light shines through the cracks. There are grim moments, but there is much self-deprecating humour in the dialogue and dramatic irony in the plot twists and reversals as over-confidence crumbles to humility or shame.

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