



ROYAL FOREWORD

Dato' Dr M. Shanmughalingam's short stories and poems have been published previously in 37 national and international anthologies. I am delighted that he has now brought together in one book 15 of his best short stories, including six new ones.

I have known Dato' Dr Shan since our Oxford days, when I was reading Philosophy, Politics and Economics and he was studying for his D.Phil in Political Economy and Government. He was already enjoying success in the very different world of literature back then, when he won second prize in the Oxford University Short Story Competition, judged by the esteemed novelist Iris Murdoch and her husband, Professor John Bayley. So I was not at all surprised when he went on to gain further acclaim in the literary arena after Oxford.

While I proceeded to study and work on our country's economic history, Dato' Dr Shan has focused on illuminating our historical experiences through his colourful stories, the settings of which span the colonial period, the Japanese Occupation and the formative years of our independence. Such fictional accounts are just as important for understanding our history as non-fictional approaches, and the individual lives and specific events that are described in these stories convey most effectively the growing pains and the joys of a young and developing Malaya, later Malaysia.

The stories in this collection are set within the Jaffna Tamil community to which Dato' Dr Shan belongs. This small diasporic community, originating in northern Sri Lanka, has always punched well above its weight in Malaysia and beyond, producing the first education minister in Malaya and two deputy prime ministers in Singapore; countless highly regarded professionals from doctors, lawyers and engineers to key members of the Malaysian civil service; female freedom fighters and social activists on women's rights, education and social justice; sporting heroes; and literary figures such as this author.

But while the stories appear on the surface to be about the Jaffna Tamil community—depicting the hopes, dreams and foibles of its members alongside its foods, cultural and religious practices, and even its names—the insights they provide on the human condition go well beyond the experiences of any one ethnic group. The careful diligence of the wife trying to protect her less discreet husband during the Japanese Occupation, the pride of the civil servant in his prospective promotion, the frustrated ambitions of a dutiful housewife—all these illuminate universal emotions, struggles and relationships, cutting across the experiences of any one group to speak to us all.

It is this aspect that I value the most in this collection, along of course with its humour. Our most human pretensions and weaknesses are depicted with a light and humorous touch that shows the author's deep empathy and his acute understanding of the human condition. Dato' Dr Shan laughs with, rather than at, his community, whose nuances, little jokes and colloquial terms he knows intimately. He pokes gentle fun at the civil-service careerism and the boastful Tamil mothers seeking for their daughters upward mobility through marriage, but all are portrayed sympathetically, with an indulgent rather than critical eye and to great comic effect. As the writer and

professor Shirley Lim put it, tear-jerking is easy, but a special talent is required to write with humour.

Medical doctors appear a lot in the collection, seen as prize catches in marriage by ambitious mothers, and generally as the wealthy saviours of the sick and the unwed. Food also features widely, with domestic scenes revealing in detail the daily lives of the female characters as they buy ingredients, prepare dishes for their husbands and families, teach neighbours how to cook, and make gifts of food to potential suitors or their families. Apart from making one's mouth water, some of these dishes have particular symbolic significance, including kolukkattai with gula Melaka syrup, dodol, and the mutton curry that gives the book its title. Characters and situations are brought to life through the smallest details, with images such as folded arms, or the hem of a saree sweeping across a woman's face, loaded with meaning.

But there is also a more serious side. The stories provide rich historical and cultural insights into issues from the patriarchal constraints on women to the resistance to colonial and neo-colonial institutions, such as in the stories about foreign officials whose missions to the country are thwarted by cultural differences. I found the stories of Rasamah/Chelvi and Indra/Thangachi particularly compelling for their sensitive treatment of familial struggles, betrayals and disappointments. Even the horrors of the Japanese Occupation are effectively conveyed through the same combination of the author's detailed description of a specific individual's experience, his deft characterisation and, above all, his use of humour.

Dato' Dr Shan is a master storyteller, as this collection amply demonstrates. His distinctive voice and high quality of writing make for a most pleasurable, rewarding and stimulating read.

HRH Sultan Nazrin Shah
Istana Iskandariah, Kuala Kangsar