

Capturing the soul of a community

Veteran author Datuk Dr M. Shanmughalingam weaves narratives from real life inspirations in his first anthology.

By **TERENCE TOH**
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WHEN author Datuk Dr M. Shanmughalingam was a young lad, he wanted to study Literature at university. It seemed a logical step for the avid reader to take; so when asked his choice of subjects for university, literature was his first pick. Economics his last.

Fate, however, took him down a different route. The then acting Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Malaya, Ungku Abdul Aziz, summoned Shanmughalingam to his office one day, announcing he had plans for him.

"He said to me, 'Young man! We are a newly developing country. We need economists and engineers! Literature and history you can study on your own, at your leisure! But economics we need to teach you,'" Shanmughalingam recalls at a recent interview.

"And my father always told me that I had to put my duty before pleasure. So his words struck a chord with me. Economics, I felt, was like medicine – it might taste awful, but it's good for you and for the country. So although I had a heavy heart, I went for it."

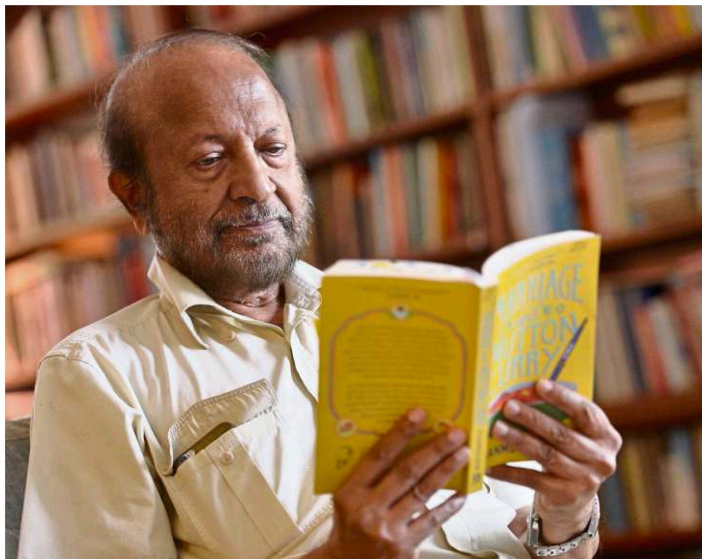
It was a decision that in the long run, turned out to be beneficial. For Shanmughalingam ended up not only excelling in the field of economics but also became a successful author as well. And this year, he celebrates the publication of *Marriage And Mutton Curry*, his first ever solo collection of short fiction. (The book is reviewed below.)

Born in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur, Shanmughalingam's life could have come straight out of a novel. His father came from a poor family, while his mother was well-to-do. As destiny would have it, they fell in love.

"My father was a very serious man, and very principled. He got us up at four every morning to work. My mother, on the other hand, was a very humorous woman, and was a great cook. That's why my stories are full of food and humour, they're from her," Shanmughalingam says.

"My mother would also read to me a lot. Particularly *Aesop's Fables*. She read them to me so much, I even thought Aesop was my uncle!"

Growing up in a Jaffna Tamil neighbourhood, Shanmughalingam would listen to his



Telling and writing down stories is 'an important part of showing the soul of the country, from one generation to another', says Shanmughalingam. — RAJA FAISAL HISHAN/The Star

mother talking to his neighbours, who all freely gossiped all around him.

"All their dialogue was just swimming in my head, just waiting to be told as stories. That's why a lot of my stories all begin with lines of dialogue," the author says.

Shanmughalingam received his education from Victoria Institution, and later went on to receive a degree with Honours from Universiti Malaya, a Masters from Harvard, and a PhD from Oxford University – all this despite going with his second choice of subject! He served at the Finance Ministry and Petronas, and is presently the managing director of investment holding and consultancy company Trilogic Sdn Bhd.

While his economics career soared, Shanmughalingam never lost his love for writing. In 1977, his first short story, *Birthday*,

was published: it won second place in the Oxford University Short Story Prize, in a competition judged by none other than author Iris Murdoch and literary critic and writer John Bayley. Talk about making up for lost time.

Since then, his short stories and poems have been published in 37 anthologies and broadcasts.

Marriage And Mutton Curry comprises 15 stories; nine are previously published favourites, while six are brand new tales. The book, which was published by Singapore's Epigram Books, also comes with a royal Foreword written by Perak Ruler Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, who launched the book on Thursday. (The two knew each other at Oxford.)

Shanmughalingam's stories brim with wit and humour, and while many are tales of the Tamil Jaffna community, all of them speak of

the human experience. According to the author, the stories were chosen as a way to show the reader three major periods in Malaysia's history: colonial times, life during World War II's Japanese Occupation, and the formative years of independence.

Shanmughalingam describes his works as "fact-ion" – fiction based on real happenings, but turned around so much that they become a representation of their themes. "The Barefoot Man From Malaya", for example, is based on an evocative line his mother once said to him: "When your father came to propose to me, he came barefoot."

Some of Shanmughalingam's stories take place in the Treasury, a place he's thoroughly acquainted with, of course: "Raman's American Visitor", tells of a man in the Treasury who completely misunderstands the purpose of an American's visit to him, while "His Mother's Joy" is about a mother who is very proud of her son's position in the department, to the point of bragging.

"Seek And Ye Shall Find?" is about a civil servant who longs for a promotion, only to have the unexpected happen, while "Naming Names" is a humorous story examining the Tamil Jaffna habit of giving nicknames. "Half-And-Half", on the other hand, is more serious, examining a man in a difficult position.

"It's about a concept I'm very fascinated with. People who don't belong fully to one category or another. Here's a Malaysian who looks Caucasian. So when the British were around, he had the time of his life, enjoying all the benefits of being 'British' without being one. But when the Japanese came ... see what happens!" Shanmughalingam says.

The author plans to publish a book of poetry after this, and maybe a book of children's stories. But it's too early to confirm anything, Shanmughalingam says.

In the meantime, his advice to young authors? Read and write as much as you possibly can.

"Read, read, read, read. And jot down all your thoughts, if not you will forget them. If everything is just in your head, when you die, it's like a library's burnt down."

"Write everything down. It's an important part of showing the soul of the country, from one generation to another," Shanmughalingam says.

Review by **LAWRENCE PETTENER**
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LIKE Malaysia itself, this book is a melting pot of story settings and situations. Played out as satire, the action occurs mostly within one Malaysian community at the turn of this century and the second half of the previous one. High finance, the Japanese Occupation, family and work life combine with views from outsiders.

What brings unity to this varied collection is the author's Jaffna Tamil community and its preoccupation with status (plus food and matrimony, of course). Crucially, there is also plenty of humour.

Not only that, the protagonists themselves vary across racial and gender boundaries, putting paid to the spurious notion that authors should only write what they know.

M. Shanmughalingam doesn't have a go at any particular group more than the others; OK, perhaps his own Jaffna Tamil enclave gets a little extra lovingly critical attention, with "rice-bowl Christians" for example, being reprimanded for failing to appreciate their own culture, in "Victoria And Her Kimono". There are other such fond episodes.

Like a poet, the author has worked his story titles to chime ironically with their satirical contents. The reader is often rewarded at the end of the story, as in "Victoria And Her Kimono", in which the final phrase adds an ironic something extra to the story's title. A similar effect occurs in "Half And Half".

Preoccupation with status is dealt with humorously in several of the stories, pointedly revolving around culturally colonial Westerners' misunderstandings of Malaysian

A match of two halves

life. This contrasts sharply with much joyfully ludic wordplay, which gets going nicely rudely in some ambiguous surnames and comes to a high point in "Naming Names".

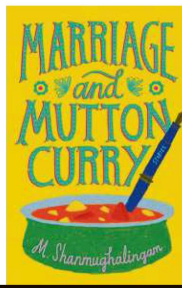
Fittingly, the author doesn't get trapped in the overuse of adjectives or descriptions. Instead, he evokes family life and feeling via that ultimate Malaysian medium of cross-racial relations, food. Appam and coconut sambal chutneys are evoked by mere mentions, alongside his characters' tangible delight in comforting staples such as kaya and Ipoh coffee. The importance of food to Malaysia is spelled out in literal terms in "Money Man" – as observed by its outsider protagonist once again.

Lives in this book's world are firmly centred on duty: careers and family (especially in "His Mother's Joy"). Sentimentality aside, there is no agonising over the finer feelings; necessity always cuts through. As befits a nation in rapid flux, clipped colonial speech patterns have morphed into the repressed feeling faculties of those who simply have to get on with everyday life under authoritarian regimes – Stockholm Syndrome, perhaps.

Like Irish lives stalled by stasis in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, the thwarting of Asian ones (Rasamah's elusive dream of teaching) is painful to read. Those that do still inhabit their own feeling faculty, and hence their integrity – the women, mostly – find ways to club together and offload; while those at the top of the tree (the men) appear to have attained their positions largely by locking

Marriage And Mutton Curry

Author: M. Shanmughalingam
Publisher: Epigram, short stories



themselves out of feeling entirely, and by compartmentalising their feelings. We rarely get what Kandasamy is feeling; as his career takes off exponentially, these things are only occasionally implied.

"His Mother's Joy" begins with cordial interactions between Indian and Chinese neighbours. However, when it comes to furthering one's lot in life, meaning soaring rapidly ahead of one's peers and neighbours, horoscopes are mentioned in the same breath, comically, as "the magic word" spoken to those in authority (along with the ubiquitous bribe this implies).

Wordplay blossoms magnificently in "Naming Names", in which the odd irony-laden line is dropped in as a welcome epiphany: "A thousand flowers bloomed". With its terse

humour, this story is well positioned after the heavier, power-wielding tropes of the diplomatic ones.

The darker stories of the book's second half span several chapters, including the eponymous title tale. Separately, sometimes, characters also weave in and out of stories. As the sagas spiral into compellingly relatable domestic horror stories, one reads on, mortified at increasing levels of hateful behaviour and wondering which side to feel against least – their characters being almost equally odious and malevolent.

Kandasamy's dealings with his wife, Rasamah, and her interactions with her neighbour, Chelvi, in the title story come to mind here, as well as troubled family episodes involving Rasamah and her sister, Thangachi.

As a proofreader and copy-editor, I have rarely seen a publication of any sort in the last 40 years which is at all consistent in its grammar, spelling and punctuation. Not only consistent, but clear and correct; this one stands head and shoulders above them all – from East or West – without exception, reminding this reader how a book's flow can make for joyful reading.

Marriage And Mutton Curry is a heart-making chortle at the recent past in Malaysia's Jaffna Tamil community, and its title brings its ingredients to simmer together nicely. The darkness of deeds outlined in the second half are bound to ramp up its chilli level.