



Review of
M. Shanmugalingam,
Marriage and Mutton Curry

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In Malaysia, there is a tendency to lump people together into large, undifferentiated masses — all Malays are the same, all Chinese are the same, all Indians are the same. When such assumptions are made, cultural specificity is lost, or goes unnoticed, and the richness and variety of a diverse society are diminished. That is why books like M. Shanmugalingam's *Marriage and Mutton Curry* are so important; through a collection of largely good-humoured short stories, the writer documents the culture, religious practices, linguistic quirks, food, ambitions, and social habits of a small ethnic group, the Jaffna Tamils, allowing us as readers to enter into that community, to relish the differences and discover the similarities.

Shanmugalingam treats many of his subjects with affection, but is also aware of their faults, critiquing them with a humour that nonetheless can bite. Ramanan, in the story "Victoria and her Kimono", is self-important and blind to his own faults and foibles. Steeped in his unswerving, unquestioning loyalty to the colonisers, he is unable to deal with the Japanese invasion of 1942, and it is up to his wife to steer them through the perils of the time. The author starts by presenting Ramanan as a no-nonsense English teacher, while his wife, Vickneswari, seems lost in the fantasy world of Tamil cinema. And yet, it is she who ultimately learns to adapt to the new situation under the Japanese, to pretend to bow to Japanese demands, while Ramanan endangers himself by refusing to change his ways. He does, however, ultimately see the value of his wife's strategies. In "His Mother's Joy", Mrs Kandiah's pretension and folly are exposed, but unlike Ramanan, she does not learn from her mistakes. She becomes aware that her constant boasting about her son might actually have jeopardised his future in the Civil Service. However, her response is not to stop boasting, but to start boasting instead about her as-yet non-existent grandchildren.

Shanmugalingam also laughs at the preference (common across so many Indian cultures) for male children – as in "Birthday", where a minor mix-up by the nurse has an entire extended family celebrating the birth of a male child (they predict future greatness for him), only to have those dreams collapse when they are informed that the child is actually a girl. While the way in which the family's dreams are deflated is amusing, the story does ask us to consider the unfairness of the general attitude towards male and female children, an attitude which is expressed even more starkly in "Flowers for KK" and "The Indra Quartet", both of which stories follow the same group of characters. The preference for male children blights the lives of two generations in these stories, with a husband favouring the wife who gives him a son and side-lining the one who gives birth to a girl; the mother of the girl oppresses the mother of the boy, while favouring the boy over

her own daughter. Her obsessions eventually destroy the family. In “Rani Taxis Away”, a young woman decides to defy convention, angered by the control exerted over her by her family and society. So little autonomy do they grant her, that her perceived bad behaviour has to be discussed not only with her father, but also her fifteen-year-old brother. Women, her mother suggests, are entirely dependent on male protection.

Many of these stories do suggest, however, that the women can be more dangerous than men. It is generally the women who are shown to police the behaviour of other women. In “Rani Taxis Away”, Rani sees Mrs Kandiah as a controlling bully. Rani’s mother, however, sees her as someone who “upholds the morals in our community” (210); typically, the community’s morals are seen to inhere in the women, in ‘honourable’ female behaviour. Rani feels trapped by this attitude. She understands that her mother’s generation needs “deep roots”, but she herself feels “like a bird, a bird that wants to fly” (210). What Shanmugalingam captures here is the inter-generational tension common in diasporic communities, reflecting on the one hand the desire to hold on to the old ways, and on the other hand, the urge to adapt and change to the ways of the new home.

Shanmugalingam puts a humorous twist on this nosy, controlling behaviour in “Free and Freed”, where Mrs Kandiah (is it the same Mrs Kandiah in every story?) takes it upon herself to confront and interrogate a young man who has been seen out with a young woman. Because their behaviour is so beyond the norms for the community, the unknown young man is seen as “an evil orphan, badly brought up by a dog worse than all other dogs” (192) – but when he is discovered to be a doctor, all is forgiven. Upholding the morals of the group clearly takes second place to issues of money and status. There is also a large dose of self-interest involved, with Mrs Kandiah demanding free consultation and the right to see the doctor without appointments. This rather opportunistic behaviour undermines the claim by Rani’s mother that people like Mrs Kandiah are defending the community’s standing. This also opens up space for talking about behaviour which does not follow the ‘old ways’, but which has its own merits. The behaviour of the young man and woman involved in this story, for example, points to the desire of the second generation to move away from the confines of strictly customary behaviour; not only are they going on dates, but the young man declares that he will refuse to accept a dowry (even though, as a doctor, he is ‘worth’ a lot). The author hints at non-conformity and rebellion even among the older generation. In “The Barefoot Man from Malaya”, the young man decides on his own who he wants to marry, and is audacious enough to approach the young lady himself – while she also decides for herself to marry him, so that she can have a more adventurous and independent life.

While Shanmugalingam flirts with the idea of adaptation and change in culture, he also fondly records common cultural practices among the Jaffna Tamil community. In “His Mother’s Joy”, he refers to the “6am

ritual dipper bath” (90), prayer rituals, and sweet dumplings called ‘kolukattai’ (indeed, the kolukattai appear in several stories). In the title story, “Marriage and Mutton Curry”, he describes “special spicy mutton curry with marrow bones so rich he would eat like a king. The pineapple pacheri made with red and green chillies” (133). In “Flowers for KK” he describes the wedding ceremony in detail and devotes an entire story to the practice among the Jaffna Tamils of giving nicknames to individuals, in response to the fact that so many of them share the same names. “Naming Names” is not a short story with a plot, so much as a short article explaining how nicknames are given – based on jobs, physical features, oft-repeated catchphrases, habits of character, and so on. Clearly, however, the author revels in the inventiveness of his community.

The stories in this collection are humorous, though some veer toward the dark and edgy. All in all, they affectionately (but not uncritically) capture the habits and culture of a small but significant ethnic minority in Malaysia, and remind us that what appears to be a monolithic community is actually not only a highly differentiated but, increasingly also, a hybrid one.