

“A master storyteller.”

— HRH SULTAN NAZRIN SHAH

MARRIAGE
and
MUTTON
CURRY



M. SHANMUGHALINGAM

“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**

“Dr. M. Shanmughalingam allowed me to read his work, which proved invaluable to my understanding of the Tamils. I hugely enjoyed *Victoria and Her Kimono* and the humour in Shan’s other stories.”

—**Peter Carey, twice winner,
Booker and Commonwealth Writers’ Prizes**

“M. Shan, with his domestic ethos is, above all, unpretentious and warm. The sure sense of dialogue and timing is allied with a certain originality.”

—**Iris Murdoch, and John Bayley,
professor of English, Oxford University**

“Dr Shanmughalingam is one of the finest short-story writers writing in English today. He is in a class of his own, enriching the genre, in fact nourishing it with subtlety and finesse.

—**Tan Sri Johan Jaaffar, journalist, editor, writer and dramatist**

“The stories in this collection are examples of Shan’s special gift of irreverent, insouciant, puckish, trenchant humour he brings so unerringly to aspects of his culture and his years in the civil service. They are such exhilarating social comedy and satire. His distinguishing style as a writer: the vibrancy, wit, irreverence and playful use of language, especially of his portrayal of those irrepressible Jaffna Tamil dowagers.”

—**Catherine Lim,
author of five novels and ten short-story collections**

“*Marriage and Mutton Curry* is a remarkable debut short-story collection, introducing a fresh, original, satirical eye cast upon a minor ethnic tribe, the Jaffna Tamils, in a multiracial nation of multiplicities of ethnic tribes. The stories are compressed, their humour lightly deadly, and I welcome and celebrate the collection’s recovery of this almost-lost tribe for Malaysian literature.”

—**Shirley Geok-lin Lim,**
award-winning author of *Among the White Moon Faces*

“Shan’s stories are wickedly very funny; in particular, the stories about the Kandiah family, of Ceylon Tamils. He observes them with a tolerant, forgiving eye, aware of their all-too-human foibles.”

—**Robert Yeo, author of poems, plays and a memoir**

“I enjoyed the humour of Shan’s stories very much and his eye for irony. I think his short stories work because he is so pithy.”

—**Dipika Mukherjee, author of *Thunder Demons*,
long-listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize**

“It’s been quite a while that I enjoyed humour in Malaysia stories. But Shan’s is a humour that is full of everyday irony, and therefore very humane and down-to-Malaysian-earth. His end-of-story surprises are done with sensitivity and well-hewn skill.”

—**Muhammad Haji Salleh,**
poet and recipient of the Malaysian National Laureate

“Dr Shan writes of the Malaysian Jaffna Tamil community with a light, often humorous touch, deftly capturing the syntax and cadences of his subjects’ speech, but this light touch disguises a sharp satirical bent and much trenchant commentary on social and family dynamics.”

—**Preeta Samarasan,**
award-winning author of *Evening Is the Whole Day*

“These stories remind us that cultural identity is both an asset and a refuge during hard times.”

—**Michael Vatikiotis,**
regional director, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Singapore

“Shan can’t resist a pun-studded repartee or a mouth-watering description of food, perhaps the two most endearing traits of his world. The characters and situations in many of his stories, especially those featuring Mrs Kandiah, deserve to be dramatised on stage. The Tamil community and its concerns that Shan describes may have given way to modernity, but they are kept alive in these stories.”

—**Ronald D. Klein,**
professor of English studies, Hiroshima Jogakuin University, Japan

“I have much enjoyed Dr M. Shan’s short and carefully observed stories of Malaysian life. I hope our paths may cross again somewhere in the future.”

—**Sir Drummond Bone, master, Balliol College, Oxford University**

“I like his empathy and kind portrayals but I also liked the darker tale of two sisters and the twins: parts I found riveting. Shan’s fiction evokes the times, often much more so than many social or political histories, e.g., Hilary Mantel.”

—**Hugh Peyman, founder of ResearchWorks and author of
*China’s Change: The Greatest Show on Earth***

“The collection is engrossing and cannot be put down. It is an invaluable addition to anyone who is a keen student of Malaysian literature, as well as entertaining for the uninitiated reader who may casually pick up the collection.”

—**Ravichandra P. Chittampalli,**
professor of English, University of Mysore, India

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Published in Singapore by Epigram
www.epigrambooks.sg

Cover design and layout by Lim Qin Yi

These pieces were originally published (in slightly different form) in the following places:

- “Victoria and Her Kimono”, *Asylum 1928, and Other Stories*, Fish Publishing, December 2001; reprinted in *The Merlion and the Hibiscus: Contemporary Short Stories from Singapore and Malaysia*, Penguin, 2002
- “Half and Half”, *A Subtle Degree of Restraint, and Other Stories*, MPH Publishing, November 2011
- “Birthday”, *ISIS*, Oxford University, 1977, reprinted in *Malaysian Short Stories*, Heinemann Asia, 1981; reprinted in *Malaysian Short Stories*, Maya Press, 2005
- “Rahman’s American Visitor”, *New Writing 4*, Silverfish Books, 2004; reprinted in *ku.lit: Asian Literature for the Language Classroom*, Vol. 2, Pearson Education South Asia, 2014
- “Naming Names”, *Ripples: Short Stories for Secondary Schools*, EPB Publishers, 1992
- “His Mother’s Joy”, *New Writing 2*, Silverfish Books, 2002; reprinted in *25 Malaysian Short Stories: The Best of Silverfish New Writing 2001–2005*, Silverfish Books, 2006
- “Flowers for KK”, *KL Noir: White*, Buku Fixi, 2013; reprinted in *TRASH, A Southeast Asian Urban Anthology*, Fixi Novo, 2016
- “Free and Freed”, *Collateral Damage: A Silverfish Collection of Short Stories*, Silverfish Books, 2004
- “Rani Taxis Away”, *Readings from Readings 2: New Writing from Malaysia, Singapore and Beyond*, Word Works, November 2012

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Shanmughalingam, M.
Title: Marriage and mutton curry / M. Shanmughalingam.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2018.
Identifier(s): OCN 844598040
ISBN 978-981-07-5622-2 (paperback)
ISBN 978-981-07-5623-9 (ebook)
Subject(s): LCSH: Tamil (Indic people)—Malaysia—Fiction.
Tamil (Indic people)—Malaysia—Social life and customs—Fiction.
Marriage—Malaysia—Fiction.
Women, Tamil—Malaysia—Social conditions—Fiction.
Malaysian wit and humor (English)
Classification: DDC M823—dc23

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First Edition: August 2018
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



M. SHANMUGHALINGAM



EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON

*For Felicity Jones, Shirene & Rohan Shan,
Akaash, Emile, Noah & Kamal Bairamov*

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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**

VICTORIA AND HER KIMONO

The Tiger of the Victoria Institution, Albert Ramanan, was so busy slapping Mohamad Ali in the school hall, he did not realise that Queen Victoria's portrait had slanted to the left on its own. In all the years since the school opened in 1893, this was its first tilt; rightward might have been a good omen, but was this sinister?

The Victoria Institution sat on its throne at the top of Petaling Hill in Kuala Lumpur.

Ramanan, the Form 1 English master, was tall, dark and “hands on!” “Hands for slapping misbehaving students’ cheeks and shaping their characters” rather than for “hail and well-met shaking”. Ramanan, with his Junior Cambridge Certificate, bragged that all of the VI’s headmasters, past and present, had been Oxford and Cambridge graduates. Each morning he hummed the school song, based entirely on “Gaudeamus Igitur” from Oxford, as he steered his motorcycle through the school gates. The VI’s crest, he reminded his students, displayed both its origins and its ambitions for its pupils with the tasteful light and dark blues of both British universities. Ramanan told his students never to ask anyone which school they came from. If they were from the VI, they would tell them on their own. If they were not, then one should not

embarrass them. He added, “You can tell a VI teacher, but you can’t tell him anything.”

He strode into the school in his topi, closed coat, silver buttons, white long-sleeved shirt and long trousers, starched till they seemed painfully brittle. In his coat pocket were red, black and blue fountain pens and sharp 2B pencils to match his chilli-padi temper. He never loosened his collar, even when perspiring under the creaking ceiling fans. As an old boy, he considered his conversion from student to teacher a case better than a thief turned policeman.

He was a proud son of the enterprising offspring of Jaffna Tamils in Ceylon. Ramanan told his headmaster, Dr Lewis, that his forefathers had crossed the seas in the late nineteenth century on the strength of a telegram: “Work Arranged. Come.” Armed with an English education, these workhorses helped to develop this land of coconut milk, rubber-tree milk, tin and tinned milk, buffaloes’, cows’ and goats’ milk. They manned the junior ranks of the education, public works, railways and telecommunications departments, for the honey of a regular salary, government housing and a pension that nourished pride more than the family.

Among colleagues in the staff room, Ramanan felt he was a man among men, a chap among chaps. A familiarity with the school developed while both boy and man, the esteem of his colleagues, and an unchallenged knowledge of his family’s role within the engine house of State gave Ramanan the confidence to regale the headmaster with a flood of anecdotes. Headmaster or not, Dr Lewis had never been a student of the Victoria Institution, had never known the secret lore passed on from generation to generation of boys and so could never really know the school he was supposed to lead.

Ramanan smiled, overhearing the seniors telling his new

class that “Ramanan Master was fierce, to be approached with great caution, if at all”. He introduced his class to *Oliver Twist: Tales Retold for Easy Reading* by the world’s greatest novelist, Charles Dickens, “who, of course, was British”.

So grateful were the students that they nicknamed him Bill Sikes. Ramanan got wind of this but had no confirmation of it. Along with the normal run of essay topics designed to occupy if not excite the eager pupil, such as “My British Holiday” and “My Family”, one day Ramanan offered “My Pet”.

Mohamad Ali, nonetheless inspired, began,
“My pet is a dog named Bill Sikes.”

That first sentence confirmed Ramanan’s suspicions about his nickname, more so since dogs were anathema to his Muslim pupil. Ramanan heard his cheekiest student betting out of the side of his mouth on whether the teacher’s collar button would burst before Mohamad Ali’s collar parted company with his shirt.

Ramanan charged up to Mohamad Ali and lifted him bodily from his seat.

“Oohh, your dog’s name is Bill Sikes! I’m going to your house straight after school today. I shall call out for Bill Sikes just once. If your dog does not dash out answering to that name, God help you, I shall give you a good flogging. We shall see whether you survive it. No criminal can survive my rotan.” Ramanan hit the cane on Mohamad Ali’s desk.

“No, sir. The dog won’t come out, sir.”

“Why not?”

“He died last night, sir.”

“Then show me where you buried him.”

“Cannot, sir.”

“And why not?”

“He is missing, presumed dead, sir.”

“A bit of a rogue you are.”

Ramanan pictured his former British teacher caning his classmate who was once caught reading comic strips between the pages of his book. He twisted his ruler around the flesh on Mohamad Ali's buttocks as the latter winced, veering away from him.

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen years, sir.”

“Thirteen years of what?”

“Thirteen years of wasted life, sir.”

The Tiger was satisfied.

The nickname Bill Sikes died as promptly as the dog did, never to be heard of again. Ramanan felt that Queen Victoria would have contemplated proudly, if somewhat askew, her Tiger's victory.

The British Empire marched on as Ramanan sat marking exam scripts in the classroom in the humid morning air, nodding approvingly at the neatly knotted string holding each script together—top left corner. But even the best regulated of empires was not without its insurrections. Index No. 67 had knotted his answer script on the right such that Ramanan could not turn the page over. He asked his class monitor to locate the culprit. Several minutes later, Index No. 67 turned up.

“Careless wretch, what's your name?”

“Liew Fook Yew, sir.”

Ramanan jumped up, kicking his own chair to amplify his rage. It was an act he had picked up from his wife.

“Are you scolding me or telling me your name?”

“No, sir! Yes, sir!”

“Make up your mind. Is it yes or no?”

“No, sir, I'm not scolding you, sir. Yes, sir, that's my name, sir.”

“Cross your arms, hold your ears and recite ‘tie knot on left hand’ while doing twenty squats and sit-ups. You can have the honour of bringing my chair back, and then get lost.”

“Sorry, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Ramanan knew better than to ask Liew to clarify his second double-barrelled answer. He felt Liew would have been a nightmare witness in court with his “no” and “yes” answers. The Tiger was content to send Index No. 67 packing while he continued with his marking.

It transpired that Fook Yew was not only the possessor of a potentially disturbing name but also the son of another VI teacher. For this reason alone, Ramanan pretended not to overhear Fook Yew telling his classmates a supposedly true story about one of his uncles, which confirmed Ramanan's suspicion that Fook Yew was well aware of the implications of his name.

“My uncle is a very rich man. When he was in a restaurant in New York, he brought his own chopsticks to eat spaghetti.” Fook Yew's classmates started to giggle, anticipating a lascivious punchline. Ramanan lingered at the door to the classroom, reluctant to interrupt the storyteller and himself not a little interested in the outcome of the New York visit. “Well,” continued Fook Yew, “a waiter quickly came up to the table and asked my uncle, ‘Wanna fork, sir?’” Fook Yew drawled out the phrase in a style learnt from watching cowboy films at the cinema. “Yes, what next?” his audience chirped as Fook Yew paused for effect before delivering his punchline. “So my uncle says, ‘Me Malayan. Eat first. Then fork.’”

Ramanan noisily turned the door handle leading into his classroom and the gaggle of small boys scattered. Although a tyrant in his classroom, Ramanan remembered with affection the Masonic rituals that bonded small boys, sometimes for life.

The next morning, Ramanan announced the annual athletic sports meet. He said every boy, except those with wooden legs or medical certificates, had to run in the qualifying rounds, starting with the cross-country run.

“Your MC must come from a medical doctor. A certificate from our headmaster Dr Lewis, who has a PhD, won’t do.”

Even the qualifying rounds before the actual sporting events left the boys puffing, as masters on bicycles relentlessly followed behind the sweating students, ready to wield an encouraging gym shoe against any backside that showed signs of wilting. As Ramanan announced the torture schedule for the following day, war was definitely in the air. The boys had prepared for it the best way they could, and as Ramanan came to the end of his list of events, a chant arose in unison in the assembly hall.

Theirs not to reason why
theirs but to do and die.
Mr Ramanan to right of them
Sports Master to left of them
Headmaster in front of them
Volley’d and thunder’d.

Although privately amused by this show of independence and most definitely proud that they had chosen to assert themselves through a poem that he himself had taught them, Ramanan knew that his position as teacher, indeed, a master, required a show of aloof indifference. A resounding shout of “Sure die lah” concluded the boys’ adaptation of Tennyson’s war epic with their own take on “The Charge of the Light Brigade”. But they had learnt an important lesson in solidarity, as even Ramanan’s unmovable collar stud could not cope with caning the four hundred.

“So,” he said, suppressing a smile with difficulty, “I expect

you have all heard of people dying in their sleep? My advice to you is not to go to bed tonight.”

Attendance for athletics the following day was 100 per cent.

Ramanan was proud of “his” boys as much as he was of “his” school and relished their many sports victories, which was one of the reasons he drove his charges so hard. As it happened, the only major Victorian defeat was further proof of the value of joint action.

The VI boys, brought up by Ramanan in the English tradition of understatement, cheered their team the way he did:

“Jolly good, good show, come on boys, well played.”

Ramanan and the cheerleaders were taken aback by the thundering yells echoing around the football stadium.

MBS! MBS!

Rah! Rah! Rah!

MBS! MBS!

Rah! Rah! Rah!

Zim! Boom! Bah!

Raaa—aah!

The cheering was relentless throughout the entire match. The MBS team was inspired.

Apparently, the Methodist Boys School had a new American teacher who had taught the boys the value of cheerleading, albeit strictly with no girls. The gentlemanly VI team and its supporters stared at their blanched Fung Keong canvas shoes.

Ramanan grumbled to his wife concerning the VI’s defeat due to aggressive unrefined behaviour and the students’ whining about travelling third class.

“Could it be a sign of worse things to come, Ayah?”

Mrs Vickneswari Ramanan was as fair as Ramanan was dark. Vickneswari glared at onlookers who called them the

kopi-susu couple. She applied talcum powder to her face as soon as she woke up. She ringed fragrant white jasmine flowers around the bun on her black hair. Ramanan, who attributed his grey hair to his wisdom, called hers “India-ink hair with white border”. She wore sarees and sarongs in riotous colours, in sharp contrast with Ramanan’s perpetually whitewashed wear. She had such exquisitely beautiful handwriting that she became the calligraphic gladiator of the whole community. Relatives and neighbours sought her out to narrate their messages through her. She added her own garnishing, provoking laughter in the reader not intended by the narrator.

His children were terrified of his temper. Vickneswari reassured them:

“Don’t worry if he loses his temper, I will find it for him. Then I’ll remind him not to be so careless the next time.”



Vickneswari’s passion was the Tamil film. After lunch, she would grab any one of her children nearest to her by the wrist and announce, “I am taking you for a treat at the cinema. Hurry, the film is starting.”

She could walk right into the middle of a Tamil film and tell instantly who her hero was as he would be dressed in traditional Indian attire and spoke only in Tamil. He was the most polite to his mother. He was the first to offer his blood for transfusion. The chief villain, in contrast, sported Western suits even in the hottest midday sun like her Ramanan, peppering his conversation with English words. Vickneswari said if she were acting in the film, she would pummel the crook who was rude to his mother.

“He was so westernised, Ayah,” she rubbed it in.

Ramanan teased her yet again. “Victoria, if you are not reading world history or doing pooja, you’re at the cinema or telling me the entire plot. Are you rehearsing to be a Tamil film actress?”

She pounced on the opportunity: “You have never seen a Tamil film. You westernised ‘rice-bowl Christians’ don’t appreciate our own culture. Our grandparents in Jaffna converted to fill their rice bowls and to get scholarships in Methodist mission schools in Ceylon. Although most people call me Vicki for short, you insist on calling me Victoria. You speak Tamil with a nasal British accent. Do you want to be a karupu sutu vellai kaaran, Ayah?”

Ramanan buried his face deeper into the literature scripts.



Ramanan was with his colleagues in the staff room.

“This rain reminds me”, he began during a particularly heavy downpour, “of the telegram my father sent to his district officer. ‘Rain so heavy *stop*. Whole district flooded *stop*. Bridge absconded *full stop*.’”

Dr Lewis replied, “Quite, quite”, turning a third “quite” into a cough before remarking that he had rugby results to check.

Ramanan was unsure whether Dr Lewis was praising his father’s wit or criticising his choice of vocabulary.

“But that”, continued Ramanan, clearly in no mood to let the headmaster depart until he had completed his repertoire, “was less astounding than when he requested compassionate leave. ‘Wife died *stop*. Request emergency leave to go to the crematorium to fire her up *full stop*.’” Dr Lewis once again decided on a forward defensive stroke, but assuming three “quites” to be sufficient for one over, played, “Indeed”.

“And that”, continued Ramanan, clearly preparing himself for a fastball, “was itself nothing compared to his altercation with an expatriate officer in the federal treasury. This fledgling questioned my father’s request for boots for his staff as part of the Malaria Eradication Programme with the retort, ‘Does your department propose to stamp out malaria literally, then?’ But was he a match for my father’s quick reply? ‘Needed for eradication of sarcastic Treasury officials, who should be stamped out, literally.’”

Finally, Dr Lewis knew how to play the stroke. “Wonderful Ramanan, old man. Your father sounds an admirable character.” Proud of the praise, Ramanan hardly noticed that the headmaster was saying this as he backed away and turned towards the staff-room door.

Ramanan saw one teacher waving to him to carry on.

He began speaking about his father’s system of grading leaders. “Well-above-average ones were ranked...Able Men.”

Dr Lewis returned to the staff room dangling a set of car keys at Ramanan.

Another teacher nudged Ramanan on, and hearing Dr Lewis admit he hadn’t heard this story, Ramanan continued that these Able Men were differentiated by the lengths their titles’ first vowels were stretched.

An Able Man ranked higher than a mere Mr Able, thus starting the double A rating above the A. An even more Able Man rated triple A as the first vowel was stretched to an “Aaable Man”. You lent emphasis by raising your eyebrow and head higher the more able the leader was. Among the triple As there had to be one supreme one. Since there were no stopwatch recordings of which of the triple A Aaable Men this was, there was a unique title for him. The greatest of all the Aaable Man was crowned a “Cape—aable Man”.

“I hereby dub you a Cape—aable Man. You are the best teacher in the school. Since I’m returning to England shortly, you should have the privilege of buying my Jaguar at a discount,” Dr Lewis told Ramanan. Ramanan could picture Vickneswari’s mocking smirk, knowing the Anglophile in him could not refuse the offer. When he got home, Vickneswari wrung her wrists, saying his entire savings would be sailing away in his principal’s steamer. Ramanan wished that Vickneswari would listen to him the way his students did. Apart from the headmaster’s, his were the only hands that had ever held its steering wheel. Although she could drive, his wife was allowed in the car only as a passenger. Driving the Jaguar made him feel he was “headmaster on the road”, even though it drained his purse.



In late 1941, Ramanan, his colleagues and students were summoned to the school hall. On hearing that the Japanese armed forces had moved through Siam, he imagined the British repelling them at the Siamese border. When his colleagues said that Japanese troops had commandeered bicycles from Malaysians and ridden south, he replied that he had never heard of any military invasion propelled by bicycles. Ramanan refused to believe the news over the broadcasting system and swayed on his unsteady feet as he looked up at Queen Victoria’s portrait lurching farther left. He gazed out at the dark grey sky, shuddering with each thud of thunder, thinking about the clouds of war that had gathered over the Pacific.

Ramanan told them that he had found a letter in Dr Lewis’s drawer when he was advised to get a spare key to his car. It read that the British assumed that any external attack must come

by sea from the south. His colleague, Encik Samad, said the Japanese had used strategic thinking and come by land from the north. Ramanan replied that Lieutenant General Arthur Percival had said in Singapore that the British would push the little yellow men back into the sea.

On 12 January 1942, the Japanese occupied his hometown, Kuala Lumpur. The VI was chosen as the HQ for the Kempeitai. Ramanan was the last of the teachers to pack the books from his class and tie the bundle with strings from the school carpenter's shed. He stood in the hall watching a Japanese soldier replace Queen Victoria's portrait with Emperor Hirohito's.

He ferried home the load of textbooks and lesson scripts he had been ordered to set on fire. He kicked open the back door and the pile toppled over for Vickneswari to carry inside. Ramanan slumped into his chair, complaining to her about Colonel Watanabe Wataru's order that Malaysians who had long submitted to British rule and "indulged in the hedonistic and materialistic way of Western life" must be taught seishin and trained to endure hardship to get rid of this. Ramanan's face felt hot reading Colonel Watanabe's decree that the English and Chinese languages were to be abolished in all schools. "Dr Lewis was lucky to have escaped as the rest of us male staff have to undergo this," Ramanan said, putting aside the half-completed English examination question-and-answer scripts.

Ramanan and his male colleagues from the VI were forced to attend kunrenjo from 6am to 9pm, where they were taught to live and breathe seishin. With no boys on whom Ramanan could dissipate his anger, it was the paper of Colonel Watanabe's warning that took the force of his hand. "Look at this." Smack. "Trainees who have no seishin," smack, "count for nothing in this world". Smack, smack. "They must never give up on anything." Ramanan's raised hand paused above

the paper as his eyes went to where his books lay piled in one corner. "Well, at least not everything he says is wrong," Ramanan reluctantly admitted, and let his hand fall to his side. Vickneswari smiled as she watched Ramanan's anger ebb away.

While Ramanan was depressed by the English language vanishing from the school curriculum, Vickneswari was rather unexpectedly raised up by her love of cinema. Ever since the cinemas started showing Japanese films, she had been going to see these as well. However, without the usual markers of dress and the treatment of parents to guide her, and since all the characters seemed to shout at each other, Vickneswari had no choice but to learn Japanese to be able to follow the action on the screen.

"Nippongo is the new way to pretend to go." Vickneswari turned the pages of her Japanese grammar book. She told him that since the cinemas screened Japanese movies, she'd be glad to tell him the gist of them if he were to come along with her. Ramanan replied that he barely had time to see movies and if he did, he would see only those in English. Vickneswari smiled to herself. "And where do you think you can see a film in English now?" she asked. "Maybe at your old school? Why not go and ask those nice Kempeitai to show one?" Almost at once she regretted her sarcasm, knowing how much her husband had been hurt by these events.

As Ramanan walked dejectedly from the sitting room, Vickneswari started hiding his English books beneath her Tamil novels and cinema magazines. Tucking a copy of *A Treasury of English Verse* beneath *Indian Movie News*, Vickneswari thought to herself, "So what is so different about the way we shall live? Are tapioca, cow herding and petty trading new to us? Perhaps a period of abstinence will do us well, as long as it ends before too long."

Vickneswari's practicality continued to protect Ramanan from his dangerous attachment to all things English. She even reminded him to remove all the currency in his wallet that portrayed the image of King George VI. Protesting, Ramanan folded the bills into tiny squares and placed them in the box of used stamps he kept ready to add new denominations to his collection of stamps of the British Empire. As he dropped each folded bill into the box, Ramanan spoke his elegy to it. "I will take you out and use you soon. A Straits Dollar is not a used five-cent stamp to be pasted in an album."

When Vickneswari told him that even the stamp collection must be hidden, Ramanan told her that she should worry about much worse news ranging from the death railway in the north to the reign of terror with the Kempeitai informers, torture and imprisonment for the wide range of misdeeds (including the lesser ones of listening to the BBC or failure to bow low enough at Japanese sentry points), shortages of food and the banana currency that wouldn't even buy one bunch of the bananas displayed on their notes. He lifted the blanket draped around his radio. He could hear stations only in Japanese but no BBC, so he turned it off and placed it beneath his bed.

"You thought the British would be here forever. They have retreated. One day the Japanese will also have to withdraw. Don't take them too seriously. We should outsmart them without their realising it. Don't be trapped in the past, my dinosaur Ayah." She squeezed his hand and felt his hand give a slight squeeze in return.

"Play along? For you it's all play-acting or a scene from a Tamil film. Why should I give in to these brutes?"

"I will fool the Japanese into thinking what I want them to think. I'm as bitter about the Japanese military occupation

as you are. But instead of knocking my head on the wall, I'm concentrating on climbing over it."



Ramanan continued to give private tuition classes secretly in his house to the pupils, or rather to their parents who saw a future for the English language, whether in the Victoria Institution's British or Methodist Boys School's American. His students included the ubiquitous Fook Yew, a surprising scholar, for these lessons. Ramanan proudly put his stiff teacher's uniform back on, lovingly pressed each day by Vickneswari with her charcoal iron and tapioca starch. Although Ramanan always gave his lessons on his feet, he was careful not to let those feet or his school clothes get too near any windows; Vickneswari quickly closed all windows whenever Ramanan's little group started reciting verse. Ramanan already knew by heart most of the poems he taught, but one day Vickneswari heard the sound of books cascading onto the floor.

"That," she said to herself, "must be my Tamil novels and that", she added, "means my incautious husband is pulling out more literature books."

After the lesson had finished and Vickneswari went in to tidy the room, she confronted Ramanan. "Ayah, our neighbours say the Japanese are hunting down those who persist in teaching English. I am learning Japanese already. I force myself to wear my home-made kimono every morning to hide my hostility toward the Japanese army."

"Teaching English is what I do best. Will you give up your saree and sarong for a kimono permanently?" Ramanan tugged at the kimono sleeve where Vickneswari was stitching crisscross patterns on edgings.

“I’ll never give up my saree and sarong. The kimono is a temporary disguise like everything else in life. We need to keep fooling the Japanese so that they can’t see the hatred in our hearts. British Malaya was as *maya* as the Japanese Occupation now. Life itself is an illusion but within it I create miniature illusions with my acting. Why are you so rigid?” Piercing the needle into one part of the kimono’s material, she put it aside.

Ramanan inhaled the aroma of the pandan-flavoured kueh from the kitchen as Vickneswari set them out carefully on a woven leaf tray.

“Can I have some?” He held out a saucer.

“Not yet. I made these tapioca cakes to sell.” Vickneswari cut out the delicacy into diagonals, wrapping strips of banana leaf around them.

When Ramanan asked her how sure she was that the military would allow it, she said she would barter the kueh for rice and sugar while wearing her kimono.

“Bend in the wind like bamboo, like grass,” Vickneswari intoned with a smile, “or crack in the storm like a stiff old tree that won’t learn a word of Japanese.” Ramanan covered his ear on one side with the empty saucer.

Vickneswari looked at the odd bits of leftover tapioca root from her cakes. She cut them into tiny cubes and made two piles. The larger pile she put in a bowl while she thought about how to turn it into their main meal. The smaller pile she mashed up, and she reached down into an almost empty glass jar from an equally empty shelf. She shook the jar vigorously to loosen the few grains of curry powder stuck on the base and tipped them onto the mashed tapioca with boiling water from a kettle over a bucket of glowing charcoal. Vickneswari regarded the mixture critically and added more water.

“Tonight’s soup and tapioca,” she nodded, “with the tiniest pinch of salt.”

Ramanan came to dinner wearing his white teaching clothes and his old school tie.

“Well,” exclaimed Vickneswari, “just look who we have gracing us for dinner. Is it Prince Albert?” Vickneswari covered her mouth with her hand as she chuckled at her own joke. “Maybe the prince should tuck his tie into his trousers though,” she added, “or it will flop in the soup and become as stiff as his starched trousers.” Seeing that Ramanan was concentrating on his dinner, Vickneswari continued with her teasing.

“And I see that fingers aren’t good enough for our two-dish dinner. His Highness needs a fork and spoon. Is it any wonder that your cousin no longer calls himself Kuppusamy but has elevated himself to Sam Cooper BTE—‘Been to England?’”

“Ah!” Ramanan replied, “I only use fork and spoon because we have no soap to wash all this chalk dust off my hands. I like to eat white rice not white chalk dust.”

Vickneswari heard with pleasure the sound of Ramanan’s spoon scraping up the last of his dinner, as it meant that even with meagre rations she could still make a tasty meal.

Vickneswari slipped on the kimono over her saree to check her reflection in the glass sliding doors of the bookcase. The material for the kimono she designed was cut out from an orange floral saree, one that flowed smoothly. She had given her sarees, pavadaï and pottu to Fook Yew’s mother and elder sisters to help them look like Tamils in order to escape Japanese military harassment. She joked with Ramanan that if she stitched one for him, it would be white.

“Don’t embarrass us, dressed like that.”

“I’m not rigid or timid. Off you go. Walk your six steps in front and you step first on the land mine. Thank you. In my

purse is a picture of my family, but what do you have in yours? Memories of our family's happier times? No, memories of a faded empire with a photo of your dead Queen Victoria. But have you forgotten that Victoria was the queen and Albert only her consort who had to walk behind her, Prince Albert Ayah? So I hope you don't become a white elephant like your white elephant car, more dangerous to us now, hidden in our backyard, than it has ever been with you driving it down the road."

Mention of his car sent Ramanan off on a series of reminiscences—how his love affair with all things English started with the fairy stories he read as a boy.

"It wasn't only with my car that I travelled," Ramanan responded. "With English, I learnt to travel the world and travel through time."

"Oh, so now you are a romantic, are you?" asked Vickneswari. "Perhaps you remember then how your students tried to grow daffodils in their small plots at school after your lessons on Wordsworth. But they raised a fine crop of onions." On a low table, she had placed a vase of red hibiscus arranged into an ikebana display. She reached underneath and pulled out a slim volume. "Here is your Wordsworth, but don't go wandering lonely as a cloud with that book in your hands."

Ramanan cradled the book between his palms. "No," he said. "Hide it again. I know it is too late for me to change but how can I ever put at risk my wife, when she makes such delicious dinners from no ingredients at all."

Ramanan ran his hands gently over the volumes as Vickneswari hid his poetry book back beneath the table. His shoulders drooped as he watched his favourite collection of Shakespeare's plays disappear beneath the cooking recipes, clothes patterns and flower arrangements of Vickneswari's well-thumbed women's magazines.

"Just to be sure," Vickneswari added, as she pulled a sheaf of revision sheets from a tidy stack of newspapers and magazines carefully kept from a time when they could be afforded. She folded the sheets in two and wrapped them in an old bath towel before thrusting the bundle deep down into the sack where she kept her charcoal for cooking.

Ramanan trailed Vickneswari into the kitchen.

He told her if it were a sin to teach English, he would rather remove his false teeth and be speechless. She said it was the language of their colonial past, and he snapped that her Tamil films made it the language of villains. Vickneswari swung Ramanan's old school tie around his neck and hoped he wouldn't be hung by it.

The sirens screeched through their ears. Vickneswari dropped the notepad she was holding to jot notes down from the pages of her Japanese grammar books. Ramanan dashed to latch the open window before switching off the reading lamp. She heard Ramanan curse the darkness of the nightly curfew. Vickneswari rushed to the prayer room and struck a light for her pooja to Lord Ganesha as she spread thirunur across her forehead. She pressed her chest, praying for Ramanan's life and for less stubbornness from him. The last news she heard about the bombing played on her mind. She did not share this with Ramanan. Sometime later, coming out of the prayer room, Vickneswari saw Ramanan sitting in the dark.

"Just think," she addressed the shadow of her husband, "surely when anyone doesn't obey rules, they should be punished? Didn't you do the same when you were teaching?"

Ramanan paused before replying, "But did I force my students to stand in the blazing sun holding a boulder above their heads? And did I chop their heads off if they slacked, as a warning to others?"

“And surely,” Vickneswari responded, “it is better to bow low than to lose that head for no reason at all?”

She said it was the war and the military he should curse. The Japanese had opened the eyes of all Asians despite their brutal methods. Of course, it was most risky to go out. They had to pay their respects to every sentry on duty, since they represented the Japanese Emperor.

Both Ramanan and Vickneswari paused and held their breath as they heard a dog barking outside in the darkened street.

Ramanan muttered, “If only that dog had read Sherlock Holmes, then we would all have been better off.”

The dog kept on barking until they heard their neighbour, the father of Mohamad Ali, come out of his house and try to shoo the dog away. Frightened, they heard at the same time the ominous tread of soldiers’ boots and the click of a sword as it struck the ground. Hushed, they listened to the sounds of soldiers’ slapping, hitting and kicking Mohamad Ali’s father. The fact that as a Muslim, Mohamad Ali’s father was unlikely to keep a dog and he was just being a good Samaritan, even if it could have been explained, would not have impressed the soldiers. Rules had been broken and someone must be punished, but the whole neighbourhood could hear the soldiers forcing their way into Mohamad Ali’s house and smashing furniture with their rifle butts. Vickneswari cleared her throat and spat into their bathroom sink. She told Ramanan that the vicious military officer, worse than any dog, had shouted that if the dog’s corpse weren’t presented before the soldiers in one hour’s time, the family would take the place of the dog.

Crouching under their window in the dark, Ramanan and Vickneswari listened as husband, wife and all six children scattered in different directions. As the soldiers stood talking among themselves, Ramanan remembered another group of

soldiers he had seen several months ago. He had been walking back from seeing what could be found in the market when a military truck loaded with coconuts passed him and stopped at the crossroad in front. A small group of soldiers jumped down from the truck and began unloading wooden poles from the rear. They hammered these into each corner of the road. Ramanan froze when he saw the flies already swarming around the poles. There were heads speared onto each pole and he recognised a few of the faces. He remembered how the teachers in the VI used to chide their students in exasperation—“We have been trying to drill this into your coconuts for days”—and threw chalk and dusters at them. Henceforth, he never referred to students’ heads as “coconuts”.

The next morning, with trembling hands, Vickneswari tried to snap off fresh tapioca leaves from the crop in her garden, shaking off the dust-speckled drops of early morning dew as she rinsed them in a drum of rainwater. She ignored the voice she heard from the veranda complaining about no proper vegetables and never any meat. She had heard these things too many times from Ramanan.

“So stubborn,” she muttered. “Why complain when we can’t change things. It is we who must adapt as best as we can to these changes, no matter how bad they are. At least we haven’t been taken away for forced labour like some of the neighbours; even their daughters were taken.” She called out to Ramanan, who was on the veranda cleaning his teeth with a twig and charcoal dust, “Just be grateful we have tapioca and rasa velli kilangu. Without that, could we even survive?”

Ramanan stooped over to see Vickneswari dicing one garlic clove before she tossed the flavouring over the bubbling rice.

“I am using a Japanese-style recipe to bring some of their words to your lips.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Shanmughalingam's short stories and poems have appeared in more than thirty anthologies and broadcasts by Buku Fixi, BFM 89.9, the British Council, Dewan Bahasa, EPB, Evans Brothers, Fish, Harvard University, Heinemann Asia, Maya Press, MPH, National University of Singapore, National Arts Council (Singapore), Pearson Education, Oxford University, Pearson–Longman, Penguin, Radio Fremantle, RNS Publications, Silverfish, Word Works and ZI.

Producers from Australia and New Zealand have offered to make movies of Shan's short stories. His work won the British Council Short Story Prize, came in second in the Oxford University Short Story Prize (judged by Iris Murdoch and John Bayley), received editor's choice in the Fish International Short Story Prize (Ireland) and won the Poetry Prize at Balliol College, Oxford University. He was published alongside three Nobel prizewinners, was first in his master's degree class at Harvard University with eight As and was on the Rhodes Scholarship Selectors Board. Shan has given many performance readings. He is now managing director at Trilogic after serving as general manager at Petronas and deputy secretary of the Treasury at the Ministry of Finance, Malaysia. *Marriage and Mutton Curry* is his first solo short-fiction collection.



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Dato M Shan’s short stories and poems have been published in over 30 international and national anthologies. A winner of the British Council Short Story Prize, Shan has been a current affairs interviewer, film critic and advisor on national panels for media and the arts.

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ISBN-13: 978-981-07-5622-2



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