

NINE YARD SAREES

“*Nine Yard Sarees* is a family portrait that tells the story of the Srinivasans, a family from Kalakad, India, who immigrate to Singapore in search of a better life. The book follows their lives over the course of several decades, as they navigate the challenges of adjusting to new lands, identities and cultures while trying to maintain traditions. The stories unfold through the perspectives of nine women who recount tales of their parents, grandparents, siblings and loved ones. Comprising eleven interlinked stories, this well-written book offers a unique perspective on the immigrant experience. *Nine Yard Sarees* expresses the power of family, the fortitude of women, and the resilience of the human spirit.”

—**Latha**

Author of *The Goddess in the Living Room*

“In *Nine Yards Sarees*, you are welcomed into the intimate universe of an Iyer family in Singapore and to life in Singapore—a narrative that is so vivid, that you would feel you are breaking bread with them at the dining table. The stories are interwoven and yet stand-alone whilst navigating tradition and modernity, acting as a mirror to every migrant’s soul.”

—**Dr Anitha Devi Pillai**

Author, Academic and Poet

“Populated by a rich cast of characters you immediately fall in love with, these linked stories are bursting at the seams with tenderness and heart.”

—**Cheryl Julia Lee**

Author of *We Were Always Eating Expired Things*

Asst. Professor of English,

Nanyang Technological University

“The madisar, the eponymous nine-yard saree, weaves these stories together beautifully and artfully, these stories about Tamil Brahmin women living mostly in Singapore, but also living, in Prasanthi Ram’s deft, sensitive and humorous telling, in full, human complexity in their loves and hates, joys and sorrows, envies and regrets. *Nine Yard Sarees* is an uncommonly rich and precise debut, closely observed, magically empathetic and formally ambitious. If you love the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri and Alice Munro, you will love these stories.”

—**Jee Leong Koh**

Winner of the 2022 Singapore Literature Prize
in English Fiction

“There is so much to appreciate in Prasanthi Ram’s debut collection, *Nine Yard Sarees*. As a portrait of a family, these stories connect to form a layered narrative about women, migration and identity. As a work of diaspora fiction about the Tamil-Brahmin community in Singapore, these connecting stories comment on questions of belonging and the pertinent tension between tradition and modernity. Ram writes with precision and clarity about this family while also treating the characters with the warmth and compassion that they deserve. Shifting narrative perspectives and covering a wide landscape of time and geographic space, *Nine Yard Sarees* confronts diaspora in all its complexity. A thoroughly enjoyable and meaningful work of fiction about family, community and the reverberations of migration and displacement.”

—**Balli Kaur Jaswal**

Author of *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*

Nine Yard Sarees: a short story cycle
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ISBN 978-981-18-6035-5 (PAPERBACK)
ISBN 978-981-18-6036-2 (E-BOOK)

Published under the imprint Ethos Books
by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
#06-131 Midview City
28 Sin Ming Lane
Singapore 573972
www.ethosbooks.com.sg

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Cover design by Natasha Hassan
Layout and design by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
Printed by Times Printers Pte Ltd

1 2 3 4 5 6 27 26 25 24 23

First published under this imprint in 2023

Typefaces: Adobe Caslon Pro, GT America
Material: 70gsm Enso Lux Cream

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Name(s): Ram, Prasanthi.
Title: Nine yard sarees : a short story cycle / Prasanthi Ram.
Description: Singapore : Ethos Books, 2023.
Identifier(s): ISBN 978-981-18-6035-5 (paperback)
Subject(s): LCSH: Tamil diaspora--Fiction. | East Indians--Social life and
customs--Fiction.
Classification: DDC S823--dc23

NINE YARD SAREES

a short story cycle

PRASANTHI RAM



ethos books

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The following stories contain some references to sensitive topics which may warrant content notices:

Agni's Trials—sexual harrassment

The Perfect Shot—sexual assault

Nine Yard Sarees—racism; fat phobic language

Loose Threads—self-harm; pregnancy loss

In Her Graveyard, She Bloomed—homophobic language;
pregnancy loss

Before the Rooster Calls—domestic abuse

While the content of these stories is fictional, these topics reflect real issues. We recognise that the ways in which readers might respond to and deal with these issues may vary, as our relationships to these topics are unique. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or not in the right headspace to experience the stories, do put the book down and talk to someone about how you feel.

For late loved ones
whom we mourn for the rest of our years.

The Panasonic

1996

THE SRINIVASANS WERE going to America. It was their first trip out of Singapore or India. A two-week mid-December tour from California to Nevada. Mr Chew, their local tour agent, had strongly encouraged them to bring along McDonalds chilli sauce packets: a must-have, he said, for Singaporeans travelling to “angmoh countries”. But what truly concerned Amma was that America, with its jumbo hamburgers, lobster rolls and rib-eye steaks, seemed like the last place for a Brahmin family in need of vegetarian options. Especially with 9-year-old Krishnan and 7-year-old Keerthana. They were fussier than she was, even though they and their father were born and bred in Singapore. When Amma asked Appa if there would be vegetarian restaurants in America, he scoffed and said:

“Haven’t you seen on TV, Padma? They like their meat. They’re proud of it. Those American clients of mine think vegetarians eat grass!”

It was after disappearing into the depths of a Seiyu that Amma returned with an ingenious solution—a brand new portable rice cooker from Panasonic. The cooker was white with tiny orange and yellow flowers, and just large enough for three cups of rice. It was the first item to be packed into their luggage. Soon after, everything else followed,

including one jar of Ruchi mango pickles safely hidden in Appa's long sock, a 2-kg bag of long grain Thai jasmine rice tucked neatly into the cooker, a tin of Milo powder wrapped in Amma's blood-orange shawl, reusable plastic plates and cutlery, a bottle of turmeric and a small packet of Indian salt because as Amma said, "Vellaikaaran salt is not salty enough."

Despite Amma's thoughtful preparations however, their trials began immediately.

On the flight to San Francisco, Appa discovered that the agency had ordered vegetarian meals, not Indian vegetarian meals. The whole family gaped at the raw leafy salad tossed with dry pasta, and the dubious sachet of dressing slotted under the cutlery. Bewildered, Keerthana and Krishnan exchanged side glances as they stabbed their forks into the leaves in hopes that the meal would magically transform into something more palatable. It was then that Amma reached into her personal tote bag and produced a large orange Tupperware box. The one that she and Prema Chitti, her younger sister, had been gifted when they attended their first Tupperware party hosted by a family friend Anjali Prasad.

Appa groaned. "You brought this even to America? You and Prema are obsessed! What a waste of your husband's hard-earned money!"

Undeterred by his response, Amma opened the airtight lid, revealing hand-mixed curd rice, leftover masala potato, a side of homemade ginger mango pickles and broken papadum sprinkled over the top. Appa had never looked more guiltily grateful as he waited for the Tupperware to be passed down their row, and Amma never more smug.

Then customs happened. Their largest suitcase—way over the 30-kg weight limit, as expected of any Indian family—was opened by a burly blue-eyed Caucasian officer. In no time, their first offence was discovered. It was the bottle of Ruchi pickles, the one that Amma simply could not leave at home for two weeks. The officer observed the red oil seeping down the sides of the jar, shook his head, and tossed it. Amma tried her best to look devastated, to conceal the fact that she had already packed a backup in Krishnan's Power Rangers trolley bag. Appa lamented in Tamil to the children that a perfectly good sock had to be sacrificed for this smuggling mission now that it had become soiled with pickle juice. But once the rest of the bag was surveyed, they got away with a stern warning about not bringing open food items to America in the future, followed by a perfunctory, "Enjoy your stay in America".

It was soon clear though that they would have to improvise more than expected in Ah-meh-ri-ka. Their first lunch in San Francisco was at a Chinese seafood restaurant as the rest of the tour group was Chinese. Concerned, Amma badgered Appa to ask the tour guide about the menu, who then exclaimed:

"Huh, you all don't eat fish ah? I thought Indians eat fish curry a lot one!"

"Fish is an animal, maramandai," Amma muttered, earning the giggles of her children for calling him tree-brained.

For the rest of the day, the Srinivasans were forced to eat pastries from bakeries pointed out by their guide, who now looked at them with constant apprehension. As if their presence threatened to overturn his itinerary. By half past four, the family had consumed a nauseating mix of green