

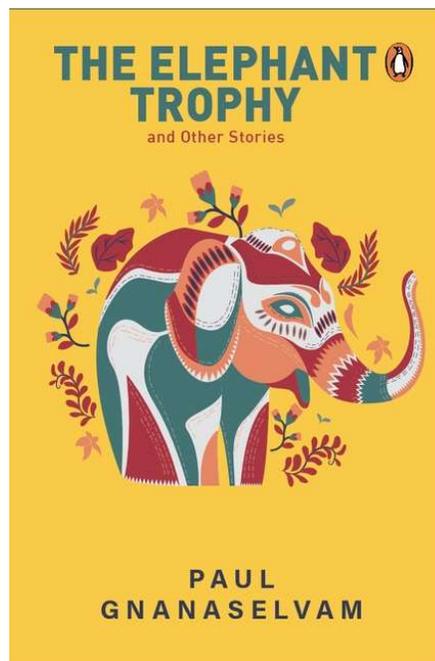
Review of Paul GnanaSelvam's *The Elephant Trophy and Other Stories* (2021)

William Tham Wai Liang

Paul GnanaSelvam, *The Elephant Trophy and Other Stories* (Fiction)

Singapore: Penguin Random House SEA. 2021. Pp. 248.

ISBN 9789814914017 (Paperback). Price: RM 68.95



The Elephant Trophy and Other Stories might be described as a sampler, spanning 18 slices-of-life – from a young man lured into a tragic life of crime, to its poignant, relatively gentle titular story of memory and death – enough to paint a vivid picture of its largely urban, mainly Tamil characters. Out of these came some pleasant surprises, older stories given a new lease of life, fitting neatly among the newer pieces.

The synopsis suggests that the overarching theme is “the outer and inner demons that possess the Malaysian Indian community”, although this is more evident in some stories than others: particularly in some of the earlier stories in the collection, where a sense of horror trickles

through. It is not always as explicit as “Kari Curry”, with its generous servings of gruesomeness and black comedy which recalled one particular Roald Dahl short story, but is delivered more subtly in stories like “The Ride”, in which class differences drive its schoolboy protagonist into a surreal supernatural encounter, and the unease and tragedy of “Marigold Wedding”. These two stories, more everyday but subtler in execution, work particularly well for the reason that you can see them inevitably occurring, with little way to derail the events to come – and for at least some of us, a degree or two removed from our everyday lives.

In “The Ride”, in particular, hope, hubris and the realities of class, status and elitism carry a tinge of violence and horror that is difficult to stomach. A subtle violence is exuded, the sort that suffuses the everyday experience. For that reason, it is the sort of story that I could constantly return to – one where the mad rush of rising is accompanied by a precarious fear of falling. It is this sort of narrative, so powerfully expressed in films such as *Parasite* (2019), for instance, that give such stories their power.

The entire collection isn’t just a serious meditation on such topics, however. A nice surprise was seeing some older stories returning for a second life, with “The Identity Bargain” as my favourite. A playful look at the notions of language and identity, told through the visit of a foreign wife to the National Registration Department for a Malay-language fluency exam, was a welcome returnee, with its characters given more dimensions than their original counterparts in Buku Fixi’s anthology, *Lost in Putrajaya* (2014). Particularly salient is the marked difference between the reality of official languages and directives, where demarcations of purity, identity and fluency are seen to be just constructs – with the ostensibly stern examination immediately overturned by the relaxed nature of the examiners and the hilarious exchanges that follow.

While the collection was a bit more thematically uneven towards the end of the book, each of the stories had enough zest to keep me reading on, with the careful everyday optimism of “Masalodeh” providing a happy enough ending, all things considered – ironically, this was originally published in Fixi’s *2020* (2020) collection, with the same sense of optimism shredded by the events that came in the months after its original publication.

I’d like to go on a bit of a tangent here. My background in publishing means that I automatically paid particular attention to how the book was presented. Determining the synopsis on the back cover was always an important exercise. This was one where the publisher necessarily stepped in to dictate the direction of the text, so that they could craft and sell their

specific vision of the book. As cynical as it sounds, this can be seen as more of a marketing exercise and less of an encapsulation of what the book and its author's intentions are actually about.

For Paul's book, the key elements were in place in the synopsis – mentions of the Indian diaspora, transactional experiences and marginalisation – but to me, this was an incomplete description. Yes, these were among the topics addressed, but zeroing in on them necessarily misses out the fact that it is a broader tapestry of stories, of the Malaysian experience where, even if we are still a plural society in a Furnivallian sense, the intersections and borrowings between ethnic groups are as much a key part of the book. “To the Cheramah” and “Tropic Quest”, among others, if read as narratives of intersections between different groups at an individual, non-institutional level, are stories of misunderstandings, miscommunications and ultimately navigations and compromises which form the basis of the everyday Malaysian experience.

In an interview with Paul, as part of the groundwork for an article that I was writing for *Malaysiakini*, he commented on how: “In the beginning stages of publishing, I wanted to establish my Tamil identity in my stories... I have also started writing short stories inclusive of other Malaysian ethnic groups such as the Chinese and Malays. When these non-Tamil characters take shape in the plot, I began to include their own languages that added colour and credibility to these Malaysian stories.”¹ I realise that these statements, to me, have coloured my reading of his collection, but in doing so provided what I think is a better idea of how to approach them.

¹ Personal communication with Paul GnanaSelvam, 26 August 2021.