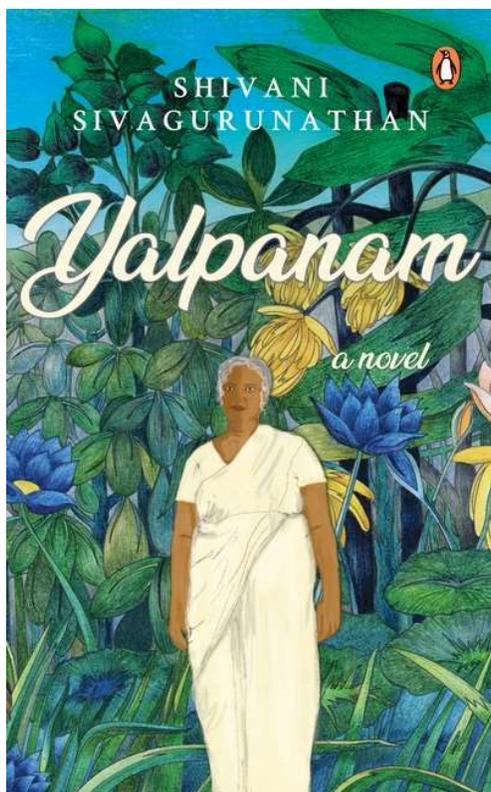


REVIEWS

Review of Shivani Sivagurunathan's *Yalpanam* (2021)

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Shivani Sivagurunathan. *Yalpanam: A Novel*. Penguin Random House Southeast Asia, 2021. Pp. 320. ISBN: 9789814914116 (Paperback).



Shivani Sivagurunathan's *Yalpanam* is an intriguing Malaysian literary piece. The title of the novel and its cover image may lead one to believe that the contents centre on Tamil cultural contexts. Those familiar with the Tamil tongue will recognise the word *Yalpanam* as the identity marker for those of Jaffna descent, duly cinched by the image of the woman in the white saree gracing the cover. However, as we turn the pages, the narrative encounter is one that is a hybrid verbal and sensory experience. We learn that *Yalpanam* is an iconic house, much like Mr Biswas' Hanuman House, with similar vestiges of colonialism haunting its pages, except here the point of view of women reign supreme, and interethnic engagements rather than the classical Indian diasporic parochial experience abound.

Sivagurunathan's work of fiction is important on many levels. It emerges from a literary mind that is grounded in Malaysia in more ways than one. It inches its way onto a stage that is primarily held sway by transnational Malaysian writers, writing from the pleasures of exile, to borrow that famed phrase of George Lamming. It intricately interweaves engagement rather than the divisions that were the common refrains from colonial colosseums and that continue to resonate in contemporary transnational literary grandstands. It also presents the dialectics of the national exodus, especially of the ethnic Chinese, for greener pastures in Australia, for its proximity and its promise of development and prosperity. It is this latter context that is especially pivotal to the novel as it effectively interjects into the host of transnational Malaysian literary renditions that seem overwhelmingly intent on foregrounding the spectres of violence and trauma, particularly from the Japanese Occupation and the 1969 racial riots.

While spectres of the past do abound in Sivagurunathan's novel, they are threaded through primarily by the bonds of emotional attachments, both of the romantic and filial type. Of equal importance is the friendship that develops between the elderly Pushpanayagi, of Indian descent and the younger Maxim, of Chinese descent. Through the dual viewpoints of these characters, we meander through a maze of reflections, sometimes through clear pathways, sometimes hindered by an undergrowth of emotional conflicts.

At the heart of the novel is Yalpanam, the big house that stands on a hillside, overlooking the Straits of Malacca. Introduced to us at the very beginning, the house and its setting becomes a symbolic overture for both the sea of memories and horizons of expectations that meet us with every turn of the page. In terms of the former, they take shape in the afflictions that colour Pushpanayagi's past and that intermittently filter through into the narrative space, edging their way in stealthily. These appear primarily in long-drawn descriptive sentences that may seem rather laborious but upon further reflection, can be seen as a strategic stylistic feature that foregrounds the sighs of the past that resonate within the walls of the old house and that consequently reveal its innate iconicity within the entire narrative structure. In direct contrast, we have the staccato sentences that emerge when we encounter Maxim and her parents, accentuating, for the latter at least, an urgency to flee the shores of the country that is seen to only impede their progress, and, for the former, indicative of her restlessness as she is thrust headlong into a future not of her choosing, and her own confrontations with family conflicts and conundrums. It is in the interstices

of these that the two characters meet and the cross-currents of their stories, emerging through an eclectic assemblage of letters, journals as well as personal recollections, offer up fascinating insights into intra-communal, intergenerational as well as interethnic dialogue and dialectics.

The novel also presents the cultural thematics of a plurilingual multi-ethnic Malaysia. The narrative abounds in vivid sensory impressions of iconic food and cultural items that may be powerfully evocative images for many readers. However, it also presents the various facets of social microaggressions, from the context of various intersectionalities, most prominent being the racial chauvinism and the pejorative identity markers that lie in the sediments of cultural memory and that rear their ugly head every so often.

To conclude, Sivagurunathan's *Yalpanam* is a compelling creative chronotope of the sights, sounds and signs of Malaysian life. It transports us to worlds closely connected to the socio-cultural legacies of modern-day Malaysia and that will interest both the specialist and the lay reader. It is also significant for its integration of the Sri Lankan Tamil perspective, a subtle reminder that Tamil identity in Malaysia is not as homogeneous as one may think.