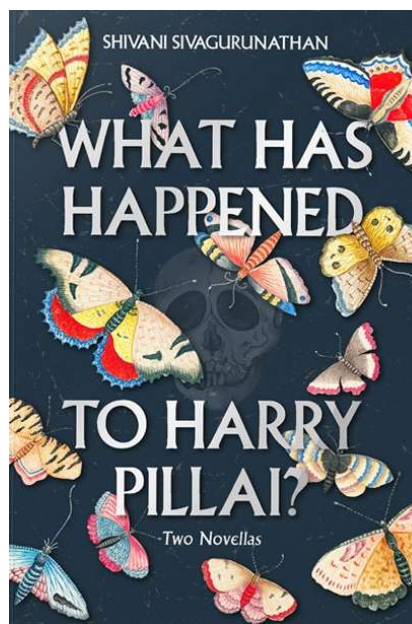


BOOK REVIEW

Review of Shivani Sivagurunathan's *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?*

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Shivani Sivagurunathan, *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?*, Penang: Clarity Publishing, 2022. 272 pp. ISBN 9789671765784



What separates a lie from a truth? This question lies at the heart of Shivani Sivagurunathan's two novellas. Both *Master Your Life* and *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?* (which gives the book its title) unfold over the span of years on the fictional Coal Island, which has served as the backdrop for her previous works—*Wildlife on Coal Island* (2011) and *Yalpanam* (2021).

In such stories, the wider community of Coal Island has always functioned as a Greek chorus, never quite intervening but always bearing witness to these events. Readers already familiar with this setting may therefore appreciate how the two novellas further expand the mythos of Coal Island and its inhabitants—like any local legend, these tales seize our imagination by appealing to our morbid fascination with all that is dark, sordid, and ultimately human.

In *Master Your Life*, Debbie Chow is plagued by a series of tragedies, too much for any one heart to take. It's no surprise she is always clinging on to something—at first it was her best friend, Geraldine, and the easy flow of alcohol that her presence enables; then it's the new cult in town, spurred on by a chance encounter with a past lover. The story's real power is that it shows us precisely why and how people are driven to fall into the arms of fanaticism, to the point of giving up everything: time, money, body, mind.

For it is terrifying how the cult's philosophies are actually very persuasive, seeming to draw from a myriad of religions. We may find some aspects familiar—the emphasis on devotional faith, the noble self-sacrificing higher power, the reassuring rituals, the demolition of the ego... The most dangerous lie, after all, is one that taps into an underlying vein of truth. Here we're shown how religion—for the cult is a form of religion—can save a life. Debbie's life, in this case: as her grief threatens to envelop and destroy her, she is miraculously thrust, as if by divine intervention, into a new, calmer life with the cult. But we also witness the undercurrents of exploitation and manipulation that no religion, fictional or otherwise, is a stranger to.

It's also fascinating that we're never quite sure how much the characters believe in this whole thing, how self-aware they may be of their own hypocrisy. They teeter on the edge between utter disillusionment and even greater heights of faith, dizzied occasionally by close confrontations with facts that would have no place in their beliefs. They may do unseemly, unholy things, but their mouths and minds still spin the same old spiel of love and devotion. Are they verbalising all this for someone else's benefit, or their own? Are these cult members vulnerable victims themselves, or sociopathic swindlers and abusers?

We may ask a similar question of Harry Pillai—at the beginning of *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?* we're shown how his ideas of running a household with an iron fist, how his misogyny and misanthropy, stems from the family trauma he suffered as a child. Is it any wonder that, in retaliation, or even out of necessity for survival, he would envision a utopia of this extent—home as the ultimate safe space—not seeing how it creates another toxic cycle of control and dependency?

And so his triplet daughters live like birds in a gilded cage, forbidden from any meaningful interaction with the outside world, even as adults. Yet the heart wants what it wants, and each sister eventually sneaks out for regular rendezvous with lovers or alternative families... Through

their escapades, their individual desires begin to take root, heightening tensions as cracks in the family's dynamics appear. Small incidents build to revelations that build to irrevocable shifts in their relationships, until the story reaches its moving, understated conclusion.

I particularly enjoyed the switching perspectives in this story, which allow glimpses into each sister's minds, distinct and defined by their motivations, secrets, and most importantly, the story they tell themselves about who they are. Penny is the daddy's girl, Betty is the people-pleaser, Sally is the rebel—these may seem like oversimplified categories, but through these characters we realise just how much our sense of self, and how we relate to others, may depend on identities like these.

Both stories deal with groups of people who are trapped by the dire circumstances of their lives, but they're also about how people trap themselves, with ambition, fear, desire, routine. The characters then face a choice—to retreat further into their carefully constructed shells, or forge headfirst into freedom and uncertainty. The endings suggest that we may only pick the former so many times before we're forced to face the death that is transformation. To reckon with its attending griefs and maybe, finally, be a little happier.

I also appreciate that, as in most of the author's stories, there's no easy castigation of characters who are flawed or evil—for, yes, there is evil. But only evil personified, made blood and flesh, evil residing in complex characters who are only driven by desperate human desires. In the same vein, no one is ever just a victim in these structures of power. You could say that Debbie was simply used by the cult to recruit new members—yet clearly a part of her enjoys, *needs*, the power and purpose her new role provides her. The same applies to Geraldine, Pinkie, Desmond, even the Master himself; the same applies to the cruel but aging Harry Pillai, to his spiteful but powerless wife, his deceitful but obedient daughters.

The narrative voice strikes a masterful balance of intimacy and distance—we are always observing the minutiae of the characters' psychologies, yet the most dramatic events are recounted in seeming retrospect, so that nothing is immediate, only mediated. As a result, the characters and the events are always placed against a wider context of their personal histories and their aftereffects, never in a vacuum. This lends a sense of the epic, and we feel—profoundly, tragically—that what happens in the end is inevitable.

So: what *does* separate a lie from a truth? Well, a truth is something that's real; a lie is something that's not. But what defines the boundaries of this reality we so readily assume can be categorised and labelled? That is both the danger and the power of the stories we use to shape our lives. It may just kill us—or free us.

Now, this freedom may come with enlightenment, but who's to say that this or that particular enlightenment is not just another sugar-coated pill we're swallowing to avoid something larger, more painful? We all need love, purpose, connection, and we'll grab at any story that can give us that. And so when we see the characters stumbling down one dark path after another, we shudder—not in pity, but in recognition. We know, after all, that they could be us. They could be any one of us.