

Shivani Sivagurunathan, *Yalpanam: A Novel*. Singapore: Penguin Books, 2021. 253 pp. ISBN: 9789814914116.

Reviewed by Su Mei Kok

Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

Yalpanam is the first novel by Shivani Sivagurunathan and returns us to the fictional island constructed in her collection of short stories, *Wildlife on Coal Island* (2011). Readers familiar with the latter may recognize the seeds of the novel germinating therein. Outlines of Pusphanayagi and Charles are detectable in Devi (“The Uniqueness of Mynahs”) and Mr Percy (“The Python’s Meal”), respectively, whereas Mrs Teng, the neighbourhood gossip (“All About the Monkey”, “The Coming of Knights”, and “The Bat Whisperer”), makes a cameo appearance of sorts when she is imagined to be spying on her neighbours.

But *Yalpanam* is much more than a sequel to, or spin-off from, *Wildlife on Coal Island*. The extended form of the novel allows the character sketches and unexpected plot lines which stood out in *Wildlife* to be combined with evocative prose and careful development of more complex themes. The result is a captivating work of fiction which satisfies on first encounter, but also invites repeat readings to peel back its many layers of meaning.

Yalpanam focuses on the unlikely friendship between 185-year-old Pushpanayagi, an ascetic and recluse, and Maxim Cheah, a teenager at odds with her overbearing mother and businessman-turned-politician father. Maxim ventures into Pushpanayagi’s home, Yalpanam, one morning after noticing the lights in Pushpanayagi’s house uncharacteristically left on through the night, and unwittingly kickstarts a journey on which both women confront the past and learn to negotiate the present.

Although set in 2017, the novel includes flashbacks of Pushpanayagi’s life in pre-independent Malaya, with the majority of the action unfolding in Pushpanayagi’s house and its sprawling grounds. This house is introduced in the opening sentence as “Yalpanam, an old colonial affair” (1), a phrase which seems at first to be an innocuous reference to the period of its construction, but in fact foreshadows the house’s importance as a microcosm of the illicit enterprise of colonization which has shaped the politics of contemporary Malaysia. Eschewing ethnic or national stereotypes, the novel at points calls to mind E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* in its nuanced exploration of the awkward social interaction between colonizer and colonized. We meet Charles, the Englishman who stays on in Yalpanam long after British power has waned, and Abu, his loyal but disgruntled Malay attendant who panders to Charles’s fancies while consoling himself with opium-induced bouts of bravado and hopes of liberation

via the invasion of Japanese forces. Charles's English wife, a reincarnation of the madwoman in the attic, is banished, for being "passionate" (98), to an upper room where she agonizes over her sense of guilt for the colonial enterprise, while Charles consorts with Pushpanayagi and Savitri, his Indian-born second wife.

But the core of the novel is the relationship between Maxim and Pushpanayagi, and that between them and the land. Shifting repeatedly between their points of view, the narrative is carefully structured to allow the complementary story arcs of the women to unfold alongside each other. The prose is well-crafted, with brisk accounts of Maxim in her modern familial home providing a contrast to lyrical passages which flesh out the otherworldly atmosphere of Yalpanam and draw the reader into its unhurried pace of life. Of Maxim's first night in Yalapanam, we are told:

Long dark whorls of the night stretch and melt. They spill into Yalpanam's front hall, slip through cracks, and leak into locked rooms; they rise like great dark waves along the corridor and collapse in the old lady's bedroom into pools of moonlight-flecked liquid tar; the dark tide floods the room where the young girl encountered her first scent of the past, and splashes across the room beside it where insects live and sleep, in honour of the butterflies that had once surged out of cocoons, over a century ago, from boxes and cupboards. (78)

Rich passages bring to life the multi-sensory allure of the plant and animal worlds in *Yalpanam* and, against this backdrop, characters are distinguished by their varied responses to their natural environments. From behind closed doors, Charles breeds butterflies in glass cases, in order to preserve them in formaldehyde and write about them in scientific papers. Similarly detached from the natural rhythms of the land, Maxim's father builds housing areas and Coal Island's first mall, whereas her mother instructs their gardener to "throw" the "bunga kertas" (bougainvillea) that is in their compound and replace it with sunflowers (179). By contrast, Pushpanayagi finds a ready student in Maxim when she instructs her to "put your ear to the vegetables and ask if they are ready to go" to the market to be sold (86).

But the novel resists simple dichotomies. For all her intimacy with Yalpanam's grounds, Pushpanayagi has named them after Jaffna in Sri Lanka, from which she had migrated to Malaya because it held no promise of a future for her. Consequently, she is not unlike Richard, who first constructed the house, named it "Eden of Edens" and attempted to infuse it with the quietness of his parish church "back home" (3). In this light, the house is a projection of idealized notions of distant lands from the characters' pasts. Additionally, doubt is cast over the mysticism enveloping Yalpanam by the possibility that Pushpanayagi's reputation as a seer is built on a well-rehearsed act which manipulates the spiritual connotations of the banyan tree in Yalpanam's compound. Yet the land remains vital because it links disparate persons across time. We are told that:

When those who can remember forget or die, the ways of the dead evanesce into nothing...But something joins the earth. The embraces and sighs, tears and rage from four hundred years ago join the earth. The warm, panicked breath of a woman as she admonished her child three hundred years ago joins the earth. When two Portuguese merchants stopped by the land six hundred years ago and ate rose apples as they lay on their backs and gazed at the dawn sky ...their terrible longing for home joins the earth. Absorbed into bones. Absorbed into the body of the land. In the trunks of trees is the memory of the first plant. (125)

Whereas Benedict Anderson argues that imagined communities emerge out of a people's perception of sharing a space, *Yalpanam* suggests that space binds together persons, whether or not they perceive these ties to the land and the other persons connected to it.

The plot brings to life these metaphysical musings. The past is literally and figuratively buried in *Yalpanam*, in the form of four graves and the unspoken memories which weigh heavily on Pushpanayagi. And whereas Maxim seeks community through "Touching bones", a social networking site with its provision for digital self-fashioning, the bones buried over many years in *Yalpanam* infuse themselves into the plants and move in response to human activity. As we discover the identity of specifically one of the owners of these bones, we recognize that Pushpanayagi and Maxim are inextricably linked because the former's history has implications for the familial dynamics which have fashioned Maxim's life and identity. At the end of the day, healing arrives through communal ties on the island instead of the internet, as the women's friendship enables the restoration of other social relationships in their lives and invites others to appreciate *Yalpanam*'s beauty and history.

The novel is not without its uneven spots. The development of Maxim's parents in the final chapters appears somewhat rushed and contrived at points, especially in contrast to the nuanced treatment which renders the other characters so compelling. However, this should not be allowed to detract from *Yalpanam*'s merits; a poignant glimpse of Pushpanayagi's youth in the last chapter quickly returns the book to its polished form and testifies to the author's skill. *Yalpanam* is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of contemporary novels written by Malaysian authors and will hold its own among them.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict R. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983. Print.
- Sivagurunathan, Shivani. *Wildlife on Coal Island: A Collection of Short Stories*. Serdang: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press, 2011.