

In *The Hungry Ghosts*, a novel that deals primarily with contemporary themes — feminism, race, politics and the ideas of home and belonging from the point of view of an immigrant — the principal leitmotif is a “Sri Lankan myth”. This says that “a person is reborn as a *peréthaya* because, during his human life, he desired too much.... The *peréthayas* that appear to us are always our ancestors, and it is our duty to free them from their suffering.”

Shyam Selvadurai weaves in the idea of the *peréthaya* with a far less metaphysical story of a Sinhalese family tormented by bad luck, wrong choices, obstinacy, greed and *hubris*, in a country where class and ethnic divisions, prejudice and vicious politicking exert considerable force on a daily basis. Shivan Rassiah, a gay man in his thirties, is set to go back to a Sri Lanka riddled with conflict to take his estranged, rich, dying grandmother, Daya, back to Canada. She lives in a dilapidated mansion in Colombo and immediately brings to mind Dickens’s Miss Havisham. Indeed, the hungriest

Difficult demons

THE HUNGRY GHOSTS
By Shyam Selvadurai,
Viking, Rs 599

ghost haunting Shivan’s life is his grandmother. The domineering Daya — “a woman who had others carry things for her” — is a force of nature. Abandoned at a young age by her family after a suspected breach of “respectability”, she transformed herself into a monstrous figure that people feared. Like Miss Havisham, Daya’s anger is the force that keeps her afloat, leading her to be brutal with anyone who dares cross her, including her domestic staff, her tenants, her daughter and eventually her grandson, Shivan. Daya’s great expectations are in vain, and all hell breaks loose when she discovers that her beloved grandson, to whom she wants to bequeath all her wealth, is gay. Her

extreme reaction results in the murder of Shivan’s partner, a tragedy that haunts his life long after he has moved to Canada, leaving Daya behind in war-torn Sri Lanka.

The Hungry Ghosts is devoid of even a glimmer of happiness. There is none to sustain any of the characters, and Shivan’s efforts to leave his former life behind, to flee from his mother by moving from Toronto to Vancouver, and to vanquish the spectre of Daya, prove disquieting. Even the Sri Lankan landscape seems to mourn as Selvadurai writes of the violence between the Sinhalese and the Tamils that Shivan sees. The fantasy of Canada, too, quickly turns into the dreadful reality of Toronto. His new home there is a depressing, grey place where he has no choice but to live in the basement, sleeping on a bed with a “scratchy, synthetic brown-and-white comforter”.



Colombo, Sri Lanka

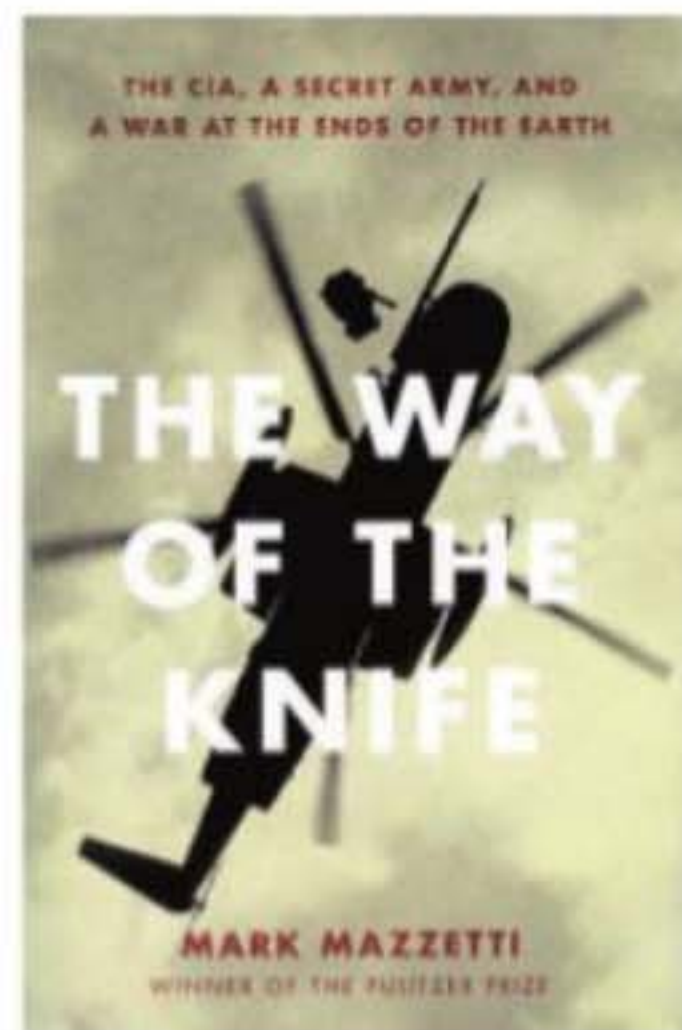
Selvadurai’s first-person narrative, with its modernized Dickensian tone, is a useful storytelling device. However, the non-linear structure of the book is — intentionally, perhaps — disorienting, and the recurrence of the

same images and phrases puts too much emphasis on the metaphor in the title; it is as though Selvadurai is worried that his readers might miss the point.

While Selvadurai effortlessly captures the reader’s attention with the depiction of Shivan’s diabolical grandmother and the confident exploration of the complexities of Sri Lankan society, Shivan — who, by virtue of being the narrator, is often centre-stage — presents considerable problems, not least of which is that he is quite annoying. In spite of being bound uncomfortably to Daya and burdened by the weight of history and his supposedly cursed state, Shivan comes across as spoilt, temperamental, petulant, self-dramatizing, and thriving on conflict. This is what makes *The Hungry Ghosts* so difficult to trudge through. We all have trouble in our lives; do we want to reel under someone else’s anguish as well? After all, it takes enough of our own efforts and energy to screw the lid on our own demons.

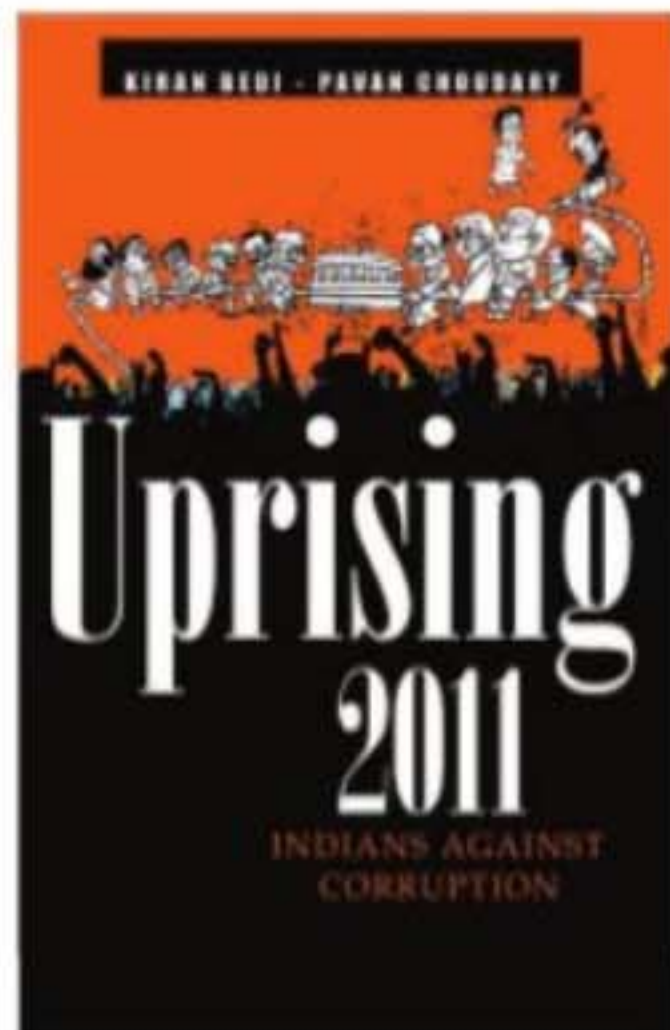
Nayantara Mazumder

BOOK TASTING



The Way of the Knife
By: Mark Mazetti
Pages: 379
Imprint: Penguin Books
Price: ₹499

The most momentous change in American warfare over the past decade has taken place away from the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq, in the corners of the world where large armies can't go. *The Way of the Knife* is the untold story of that shadow war: a campaign that has blurred lines between soldiers and spies. America has pursued enemies with killer drones and special operations troops; trained privateers for assassination missions and used them to set up clandestine spying networks.



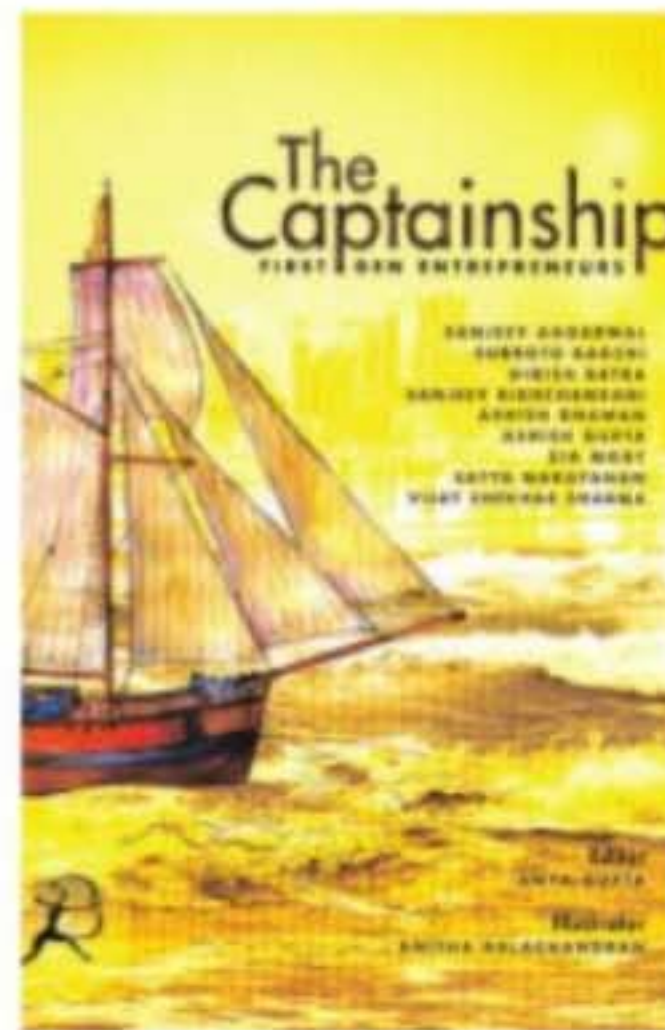
Uprising 2011 – Indians Against Corruption
By: Kiran Bedi & Pavan Choudary
Pages: 130
Imprint: Wisdom Village Publications
Price: ₹290

The book is an assembled chronicle of the civil-society supported anti-corruption movement in India, 2010-2012, also referred to as India's Arab Spring or its second war of Independence (against corruption). It gives a thumbnail view of this historical awakening and will be a quick and easy reference for the readers to form their views, reading voices that spoke as the movement developed.



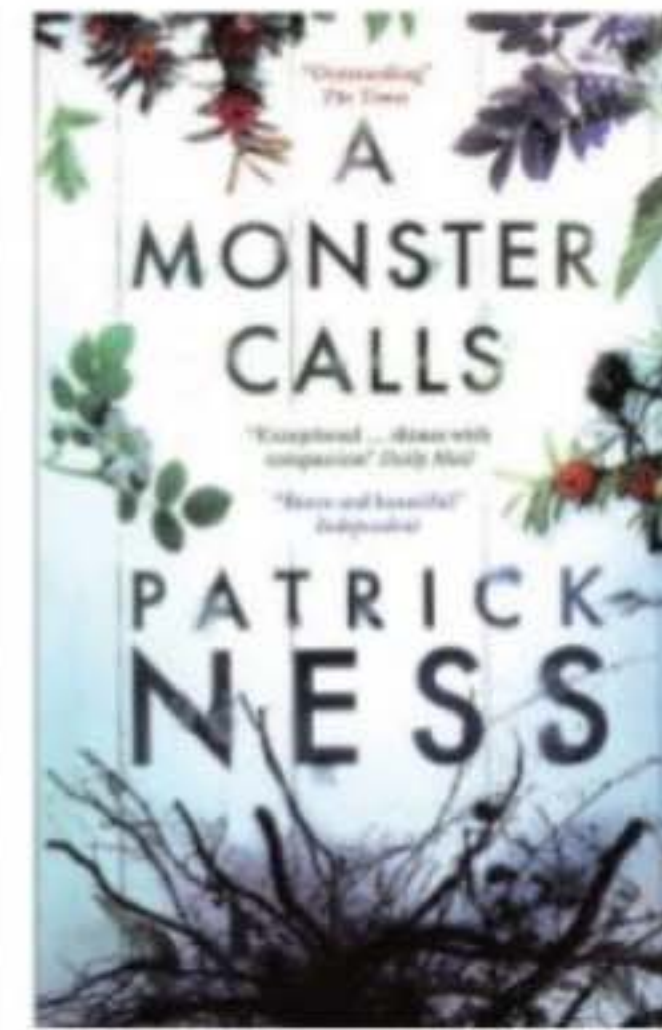
The Hungry Ghosts
By: Shyam Selvadurai
Pages: 374
Imprint: Penguin/Viking
Price: ₹599

In Buddhist myth, the dead may be reborn as "hungry ghosts" — spirits with stomachs that can never be full — if they have desired too much in their lives. Shyam Selvadurai's sweeping new novel creates an unforgettable ghost, a Sri Lankan matriarch whose wily ways and blindness to the human needs of those around her parallels the volatile political situation of her war-torn country. It is a dazzling story of family, wealth and the past.



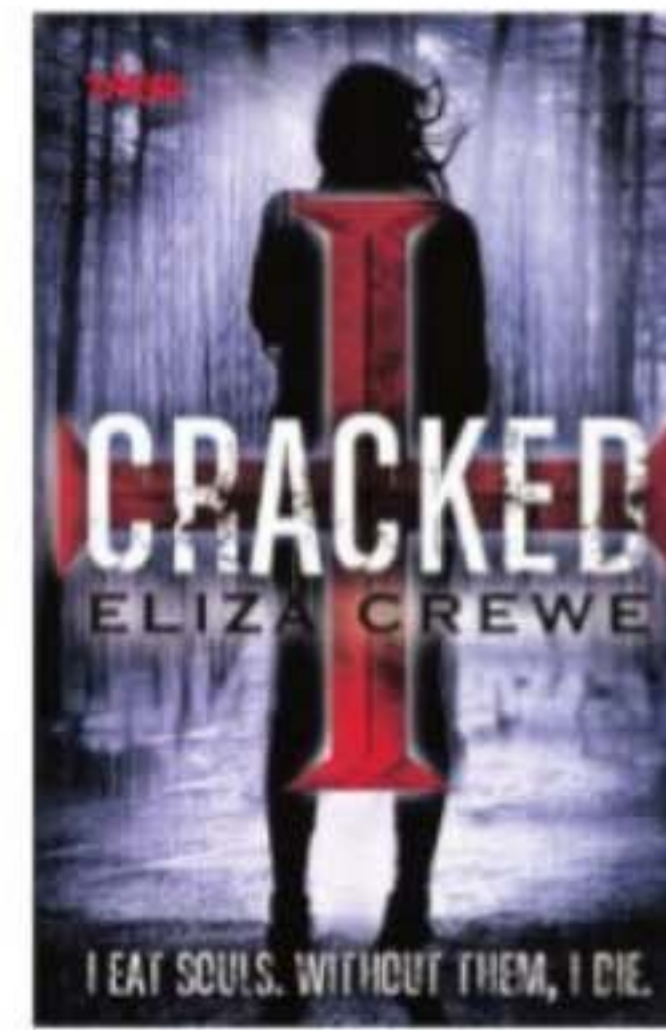
The Captainship
By: Anya Gupta (Ed)
Pages: 163
Imprint: Bloomsbury
Price: ₹299

A collection of first-person narratives of nine first-generation Indian entrepreneurs, respected for their value-based approach to organisation building. The purpose of this collection is to share the journeys of the entrepreneurs as ordinary youths, with all the joys and insecurities of childhood and adolescence. The title is inspired by the famous line from William Ernest Henley's poem "Invictus": "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul."



A Monster Calls
By: Patrick Ness
Pages: 237
Imprint: Walker India
Price: ₹299

At seven minutes past midnight, 13-year-old Conor wakes up to find a monster outside his bedroom window. But it isn't the monster Conor's been expecting. It wants something from Conor. It wants the truth. From the final idea of award-winning author Siobhan Dowd — whose premature death from cancer prevented her from writing it — Patrick Ness has spun a haunting and darkly funny novel of mischief, loss, and monsters both real and imagined.

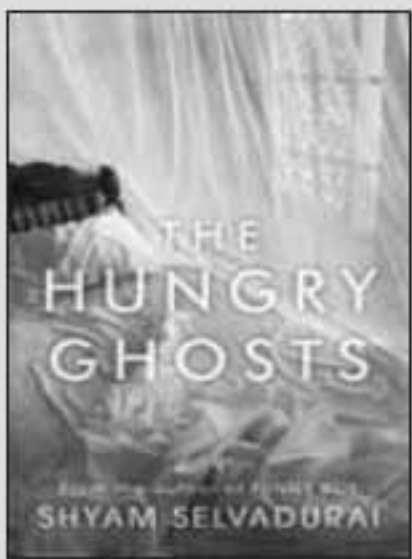


Cracked
By: Eliza Crewe
Pages: 300
Imprint: Inked Penguin
Price: ₹250

Meet Meda. She eats people. Well, technically, she eats their soul. But she totally promises to only go for people who deserve it. She's special. She can't help being a bad guy. Besides, what else can she do? Her mother was killed and it's not like there are any other "soul-eaters" around to show her how to be different. That is, until the three men in suits show up. They can do what she can do. Meda might finally have a chance to figure out what she is. The problem? They kind of want to kill her.

BOOK BRIEFS

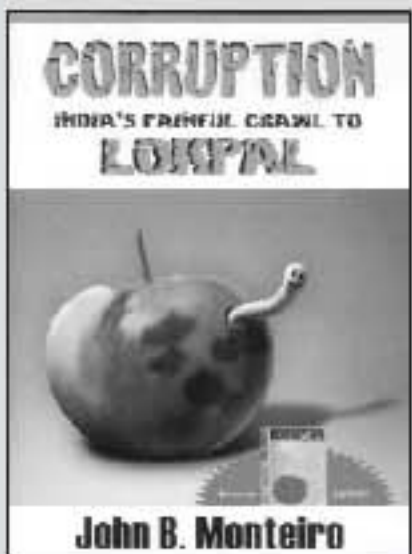
The Hungry Ghost



Shyam Selvadurai
Penguin Viking
Pages: 384; Price: Rs 599

Moving between Toronto and war-torn Sri Lanka of the 1980s and 90s, *The Hungry Ghosts* tells an intense and absorbing story of one man's restless search for redemption. Shivan Rassiah, gay and in his early thirties, prepares to return from Canada to his dying grandmother in Sri Lanka. Much is riding on this trip for Shivan, who hopes it will bring him the renewal he so desperately needs. Yet, as the night before he leaves unfolds, Shivan is haunted by the memories of his complicated relationship with his grandmother through his early years, the tragic outcome of a visit he paid her some years after migrating to Canada, and the Buddhist tales she told him with their themes of destiny and karma, which insist there is no escape from acts committed. Engulfed by his memories and mistakes, Shivan begins to doubt that the redemption he seeks might indeed be possible.

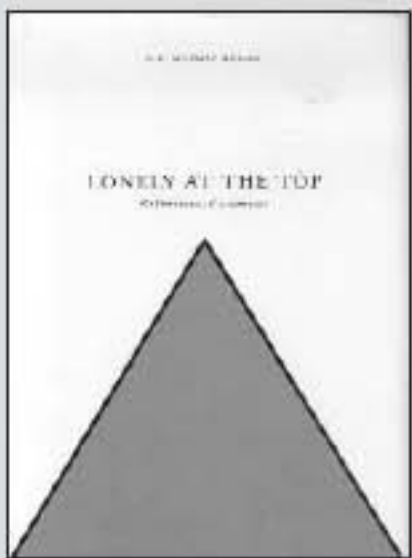
Corruption – India's Painful Crawl to Lokpal



John B. Monteiro
Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.
Pages: 364; Price: \$21.50

Corruption - India's Painful Crawl to Lokpal takes on the subject of corruption in India. It was the first book to comprehensively advocate the institution of the ombudsman to tackle it. This is a revised and updated version of the author's first book, which was published in 1966. Author John B. Monteiro surveys the causes, anatomy and dimensions of corruption, while detailing the existing machinery for the ventilation of grievances and the control of mal-administration and corruption. This updated edition tracks India's long, painful and elusive attempt to adapt the institution of the ombudsman for India, under the title "Lokpal," and details how the political class sabotaged the Bill from being enacted. It includes research on institutions in America, Britain, France, and the then Soviet Union that have been used to control mal-administration and corruption, examining their suitability for use in India. It also surveys the ombudsman institution working in the Scandinavian countries and in New Zealand, which he advocates for adaptation in India.

Lonely At The Top - Reflections of a mentor



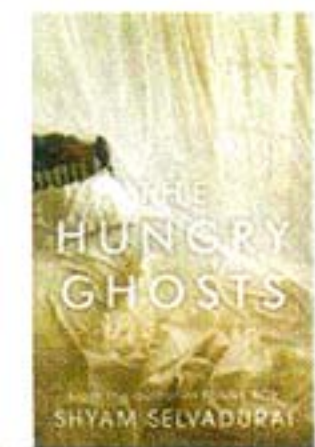
V. K. Madhav Mohan
An imprint of Leadstart Publishing
Pages: 210; Price: Rs 495

Lonely at the Top is about leaders and the challenges they face as they walk alone. This edited anthology contains the reflections of a seasoned Mentor, on the leadership dilemmas of the CEO in a turbulent and unpredictably changing world. With examples and experiences, the author indicates, sometimes subtly and at other times, forcefully, the tools, mindsets and approaches that enable leaders to steer their organizations safely through dangerous times. Many Indian CEOs also suffer from cultural schizophrenia, whether acknowledged or not a crisis of identity stemming from the differing dialectics of modern Western business culture and India's own rich, philosophical heritage. Using real experiences as telling case studies, the book demonstrates the value of anchorage in the spiritual ethos of India, and especially in the ambrosial mentoring of Arjuna by Lord Krishna, on the eve of a primordial conflict that has much in common with the inner conflicts in the minds of today's decision-makers.

Reviews

The Hungry Ghosts Shyam Selvadurai

Penguin Viking ₹599



The Hungry Ghosts is the fourth book by the Sri Lankan-born Toronto-based Shyam Selvadurai. It maps three generations of a Sri Lankan family,

dominated by the grandmother of Shivan Rassiah. Most of the book takes place in the reveries of Shivan, the narrator, as he prepares to travel back to Colombo from Toronto to bring his ailing grandmother to Canada. These dry facts give a basic outline, but the story is shaped by the layers upon layers that Selvadurai drapes over these bare bones.

For example, Shivan's father, who dies when Shivan is barely a child, is Tamil, while his mother, Hema, is Sinhalese. Selvadurai uses this small thread in an understated manner, showing not so much direct abuse that Shivan's father experiences as a member of the beleaguered Tamil minority, but the pervasive disrespect that he

encounters. The staff at the small guesthouse where Shivan's father is the manager do not abuse him to his face, but they have no problem calling him as a "son of a dog" in front of Shivan, or his sister, Renu.

The politics in *The Hungry Ghosts* is personal, oblique and obsessive. The marriage of Shivan's grandparents is a result of a complex arrangement between an older man and a young woman whose reputation is destroyed in a lover's fling. This disappointment, and castigation, leads Shivan's grandmother to initially ignore, then invest her hopes in, and then finally reject her own daughter, Hema. Hema's oppression becomes the cause of why, initially, she finds her husband's fecklessness so appealing. Later, Renu, Shivan's elder sister, manages to be both socialist and feminist out of a reaction to her own poverty, and the fact that, as a girl, she is treated as less valuable than Shivan, neither given expensive gifts, nor forced to bear their grandmother's company. At some level it is a relief to find that

at least Shivan's homosexuality is a personal inclination rather than a political choice.

Maybe this politicisation of daily events is unavoidable, as the book is entwined with the ideas of karma, and how one deals with the debts of the past. Throughout the book, Selvadurai interposes stories about perethis, the hungry ghosts of the title. These are figures out of Buddhist eschatology, people who have desired too much in their lifetime and are condemned to an existence in which they walk around with distended stomachs – highlighting their excessive appetite – and with mouths as small as keyholes, so that they can never fulfil their desire.

All of the characters in Shivan's family desire too much, in a way, and the world does not offer them an opportunity to slake that wanting, despite the time and effort they expend in running after it. Moreover, the lack of fulfilment of one desire – the grandmother's – seems to cripple the life of generation after generation, warping their

own emotions as a consequence.

One of the ways that people deal with an intolerable life is to escape. Shivan sees an avenue of escape at the America Library he browses through the prospectuses of the various universities, and dreams. "Once in America, I told myself, I would become the person I really knew myself to be. In America, I would be popular, I would be gregarious, I would be witty, I would be handsome... And I would never return to Sri Lanka." Selvadurai, though, shows that escape is never a real possibility. While most "immigrant fiction" is based on the horrors of the country left behind and the resolution or love found in the country where the immigrant arrives, *The Hungry Ghosts*, details the difficulties of transition, and the attachments, the karma, that keeps immigrants linked to the past. There is no escape from karma, except in confronting it. This, in the end, is what Shivan has to deal with when he goes back to Sri Lanka to meet, rescue and confront his grandmother. **Omais Ahmad**

When past is a FOREIGN LAND

Selvadurai walks the tightrope of his Sri Lankan and Canadian identities and relies on memory's enduring enticements to tell his story



ANGSHUKANTA CHAKRABORTY

The ghosts never go away, of the pasts, of memories, of abandoned and discarded parts of oneself, of awkward details lingering from silenced familial histories. Shyam Selvadurai, walking the tightrope between his Sri Lankan and Canadian identities, seems to rely on the past's enduring enticements for an artist, who tills the fertile landscape of remembrance with the waters of perspective and bathes it with love, inherited and lost.

'In Sri Lankan myth, a person is reborn as a *perethaya* because, during his human life, he desired too much .. The *perethayas* that appear to us are always our ancestors, and it is our duty to free them from their suffering...' So says Selvadurai, in the opening chapter of the book, as the narrator, Shivan Ressianah, a Sri Lankan-Canadian gay man in his thirties, reflects on his thirteenth birthday, on which the titular ghost of the novel, his grandmother Daya, takes him out on a ride on her Bentley and tells him that he's to inherit her massive wealth, amassed over the years.

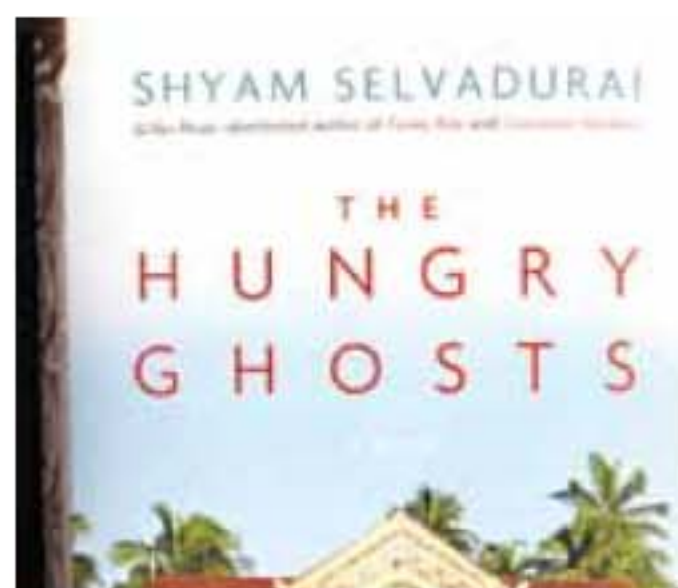
The Hungry Ghosts, Selvadurai's 'long-awaited novel', written more than a decade after his mid-nineties roaring debut with *Funny Boy*, followed up quickly by *The Cinnamon Lovers*, is a quaint and reflective piece, that revisits many of the old tropes — sexual identity, Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, genocide in Sri Lanka, culture, religion and

the history of the island nation, among others. However, he sprinkles the new book with generous doses of accounts of the immigrant life in Canada, spent first in Toronto, then in Vancouver, detailing the strange responses to the demands of a multicultural, but still predominantly white society. But Selvadurai goes beyond the usual character sketches ranting about discrimination on the basis of race or culture. In fact, the narrator Shivan is still housed in Toronto in the novel's mid-1990s present day, as he cleans up his messy basement and reminisces about his Sri Lankan past that he could never junk, despite several episodes of extreme trauma, both for himself and his mother.

Shivan Ressianah goes down into

Selvadurai paints human relationships, the nuances of conflict, the dolorous emotions and the bewildering spurts of sudden joys and discoveries, with beautiful understanding

the cellars of his history, both personal and political, between gulps of premium Scotch and wiping the dirt that has settled over the years in an unloved Toronto home bought with his grandmother's money. Shivan, along with his sister Renu and mother Hema, had come to for Canada to escape the brutalities of the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict and the protracted war waged by the notorious LTTE in the mid-1980s. Now, after a decade of little or no contact



Publisher: Penguin
Viking
Price: Rs 599

with his grandmother, who's ailing and frail after repeated episodes of damaging stroke, Shivan is slowly reconciling to the prospect of a reunion that is

feared, unwanted but unavoidable. He falls back on the old Buddhist myth of the *perethaya*, of the hungry ghosts, whose souls are reborn with enormous metaphorical bellies and miniscule mouths, and are condemned to a lifetime of greed and frustration, and must be set free by kind relatives, the progenies and blood descendants.

Selvadurai attempts a breathtaking and wide-angle portrait of the grandmother, Daya, as

he recounts the incidents from his childhood, when he saw her lording over her tenants all over Colombo, whom she discards with a punitive glee and on a whim, particularly if they fail to pay their rents in time. Despite bequeathing all her wealth to Shivan, Daya is hungry to have more control over the male heir to her humongous wealth, but her grandson, who's as cunning, manipulative and petulant as this matriarch, but he instead disappoints her with his homosexuality — taboo and illegal in the 1980s war-torn Sri Lanka. Not only is Shivan a child of miscegenation between a Tamil father and a Sinhalese mother, a talented but ill-fated Hema, he is also a gay man whose sexuality drives his authoritarian grandmother to have the love interest, the handsome Mili, murdered, in her bid to both rectify and punish her wayward grandson.

The trauma of losing Mili pushes the Shivan over an emotional precipice, as he severs all his connections with Daya, who has by now turned into a Diskensian caricature of her former imperious self, a spent Mrs Havisham in her mansion, tethered to her rules and outmoded sensibilities. Yet Daya, too, has a backstory, a suspected indiscretion in her remote past that made her family disown her at first, a gesture she reciprocates in a heightened manner, cutting everyone off. But shrewd and self-fetching, Daya manages to survive and makes a killing

in the rental business, buying up properties all over Colombo with the help of a local goon. Between Shivan's Proustian languor recollecting his encounters with Daya and his walks around his house in Toronto, the exquisite and extensive remembrances of Sri Lanka reemerge as a lost continent floating up once again after staying buried for long.

Selvadurai paints human relationships, the nuances of conflict, the dolorous emotions and the bewildering spurts of sudden joys and discoveries, with beautiful colours of depth and understanding. His renditions of Sri Lanka of the mid-1980s and the Canada of the 1990s seem to merge into one another, often seamlessly, at other times with the requisite friction that enhance the act of story-telling.

Despite great similarities between Selvadurai himself and the narrator Shivan, the writer and the protagonist never really become one, as Selvadurai makes it very clear that he has no intentions of giving Shivan contours that are larger than life. In fact, the often wallowing in self-pity Shivan, storming into and out of conflicts, wimpy about being left alone, only gradually begins glowing in the authorial calm that Selvadurai's lush prose is tinged with. It is only with this newfound stillness that Selvadurai can hold his ground, with his cyclical, quasi-religious and reclined narrative of tempestuous pauses and surrenders to memory.



BOOKS

Q & A SHYAM SELVADURAI | 47
AUTHOR

‘It is such a silly thing, this fitting in’



IT HAS been 15 years since Shyam Selvadurai wrote *Cinnamon Gardens*, the second novel that confirmed that his celebrated debut, *Funny Boy*, was no fluke. In the interim, a dry spell that yielded one young-adult novel in 2005, he has become a familiar literary figure in Sri Lanka — the country he left for Canada at the age of 19 after the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom — curating the Galle Literary Festival. His latest novel, *The Hungry Ghosts*, is a result of him using that dry spell as a period of gestation, and deals with the pains of not belonging, an immigrant’s lament at not being accepted either by the land of his birth or the land of his choice. In an email interview, Selvadurai tells AJACHI CHAKRABARTI that though he has found acceptance in Sri Lanka, he feels dismal as hope for a peaceful future for the Emerald Island fades away.

EDITED EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW

“If we are abandoning Sri Lanka, it’s because Sri Lanka abandoned us first,” Shivan, your protagonist in *The Hungry Ghosts*, declares dramatically. But you have reconnected more and more with your home country. Did you face the same alienation Shivan did when he returned?

I have been going back to Sri Lanka since 1992 and, in 1997, my partner and I spent a year there. So I haven’t reconnected recently. I’ve kept up with it. However, I did feel the same alienation Shivan felt and I felt it for the longest time. But gradually Sri Lanka, or more to the point, the Colombo circles I move in, has changed. So, it’s really easy for me to be gay in Sri Lanka. Also, sometime back, I gave up on the idea of ever trying to fit in anywhere. It’s such a silly thing, this “fitting” in, and when one gives up that hope, it is so freeing. My Sri Lankan friends also don’t really fit in, in various ways. Now Sri Lanka is almost too familiar and sometimes when I land in Colombo, I find myself nostalgic for that sense of alienation and the excitement it bred, which was fertile ground for a writer. Like Shivan, I would like to look around my landscape as I drive into Colombo and feel that sense of strangeness. But it is such a familiar drive now and often in the car, I am making a mental shopping list in my head of all the

things I must get before I get to my apartment.

Do you see Sri Lanka differently now as a member of the Lankan literary establishment, rather than an “émigré writer sniffing around for a story”?

Yes. I see its complexity much more. Working in a place really roots you there. Because I left at 19, despite being much older on various trips back, I was still 19 in some way. But now I really feel, just by having worked there, that I am a really mature adult in that landscape. I have made some of my closest friends during my working life there. Nothing like running a literary festival to bring people together.

So what is your assessment of post-bellum Sri Lanka? Are you optimistic, now that the LTTE has been defeated?

I am delighted and relieved they were defeated. They were a blight to their country and especially to their own people. However, they have left a power vacuum and also left the Tamil people without a strong voice to represent them. I guess this wouldn’t have mattered so much if the current government made real efforts at bridge-building and reconciliation, but this isn’t happening at all. Then there is the killing of journalists, the silencing of dissent... It feels rather dismal as gradually the great hope the end of the war brought is being drained away.

There has also been a hardening on the part of the Buddhist clergy. Last week’s self-immolation by a monk to protest cattle slaughter and proselytising by minorities is an example. You’ve said you don’t consider yourself a Buddhist as

Buddhism “carries all the problems that religion has for (you)” in a Sri Lankan context.

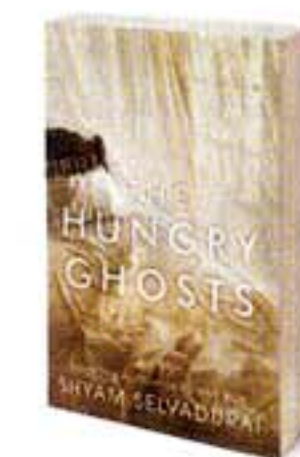
I meant religion in general, not just Buddhism. Well, what can I say? To start with, I’m not a “joiner”, to use a North American term. I don’t like congregating and praying together and particularly don’t like the basement social after with cookies and coffee. Then there is the homophobia, the sexism, the misogyny, the hatred, the fundamentalism, the ridiculous things one is expected to adhere to because one is of the “faith”, the priests you are expected to venerate and respect even though they are undeserving of it... Need I go on?

Shivan’s grandmother uses Buddhist fables as a justification for her slumlordly actions. Is that a perversion of Buddhism, or an exploitation of the non-prescriptive, nonjudgemental nature of the religion?

Yes, it is a perversion, but one that is very prevalent in Sri Lanka. The rather heartless way she uses karma to justify other people’s suffering and her own good fortune is all too familiar if you are Sri Lankan. It’s also funny and I hope the reader finds it grimly amusing.

What prompted you to rely on the Jataka

‘The way Shivan’s grandmother uses karma to justify other people’s suffering is all too familiar if you are Sri Lankan’



THE HUNGRY GHOSTS
Shyam Selvadurai
Penguin India
384 pp; ₹599

tales in your novel as an allegorical device? Was it simply that the plot demanded it, or something else?

They are not just Jataka stories but also stories that are set in the Buddha’s lifetime. I fell in love with them when I first read them as they are so simple and yet so complex. Also, as a writer, I was very interested in how a different philosophy created different narrative structures from the

Western ones, and I was keen to try and find a way to use those structures in my novels. The structure of *The Hungry Ghosts* is based on the Naked Perethi story. Part 4 mimics the denouement of the Demoness Kali story, wearing down the protagonist to a moment of wisdom and freedom.

What differences do you see between Arjie from *Funny Boy* and Shivan here, as the two wrestle with their sexuality in conservative Sri Lanka?

Arjie’s story ends at his moment of realising he is gay. Shivan’s continues on into the trials and pleasures of being gay for someone like him, i.e. non-white, Sri Lankan. Shivan, because of his inner hunger, is blind to the reality around him and this is reflected in how he negotiates his sexuality in Sri Lanka. Arjie is much more clear sighted, even though much younger than Shivan. But in the end, I think Shivan is a more interesting character, as he plumbs the depths of his soul to emerge a new person. He really does descend into the darkness, as we must all do, in order to find wisdom.

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LEAD REVIEW

Ghost who balks

Sri Lankan author Shyam Selvadurai's 'The Hungry Ghosts' is a tale of relationships shrouded in expectations and selfish motives, set in the backdrop of the civil war in Lanka, writes

SHREEKUMAR VARMA

At the heart of this story is an embittered grandmother, old and withered at just 65, defeated by love, life and mostly her own intransigence. The book begins as she takes her young grandson out on a rent-collecting tour of her properties, introducing him to the life she wants him to live, and ends with the grandson travelling back to her to heal a breach.

The place: Sri Lanka, shimmering, simmering land of beauty and discontent. The people: saddled with sad back stories that rub off on each other, getting them all sore and unsettled. The issues: sexuality and belonging.

It's true, if your past has promises to keep, if you're not like other people, if you live in a land torn by conflict, if your personal freedom is a hatstand where intimates routinely hang their decisions, life isn't such a breeze. And this book, almost four hundred pages of it, has varicose veins of heartbreak running through it, every airy, lighter moment soon to darken into sobbing claustrophobia.

The grandson Shivan Rassiah is the story's narrator. After the death of his father, a poor Tamil (and therefore a forbidden match), his mother Hema returns to her mother's home with her daughter and son. The old lady Daya is still bitter, but the sight of her grandson melts something in her. Selvadurai's Daya is a complete character, a creative triumph the reader can sink his teeth into. Or perhaps, complete isn't the right word; she keeps growing, emerging, suffusing the story, a hardboiled presence and a haunting absence, a character never completely consumed, a characterisation resting on self-centredness and old belief. "It's a terrible thing to be



SYMBOLIC The book describes a boy's love-hate relationship with his authoritative grandmother.

living out the effects of bad *karma*," she tells Shivan.

She's like those "hungry ghosts" she fears, a *perethaya*. In Lankan legend, a *perethaya* is someone who "desired too much" in life and is reborn as a hungry spirit, an ancestor who appears before us with an enormous stomach and a tiny mouth, its hunger insatiable. Impossible to appease them directly, it becomes our duty to feed Buddhist monks and siphon that merit to our ancestors. The past haunts, using us to slake its hunger. In the old lady's case, her consuming appetite for obedience has to be appeased with many sacrifices from many people.

As Shivan grows up, his life is influenced and then radically changed by two critical triggers. The land erupts into the 80s violence. And Shivan discovers he's homosexual. Both are crucial to the way his life will go from now.

When the Tamil problem gets too hot, it is Shivan who initiates their escape to Canada, a ruthless separation from his grandmother. Canada, a hungered-after dream, turns out to be drab and juiceless.

Toronto is a terrible departure from Colombo, which was home after all. Selvadurai paints people with slow, revealing strokes and infuses places and situations with the colours of each character's experience — as in the sordid search for male companionship that takes Shivan through unfulfilling streets of everyone else's happiness. The Sri Lankan political condition is a backdrop through the years, with Tigers, JVP, Government, IPKF, activists and victims making a mark on the book's characters, in fact staining them.

Repetitions reiterate and reinvent ambience. Hema and Shivan arrive at Daya's house and always wait for Rosalind, the maid, to let them in. For the dried-up grandmother, her grandson is "like rain soaking a parched land", a sentiment also echoed on other occasions. Rootlessness can never be addressed even by those closest to you.

Shivan's interactions with his mother and sister are interesting, each holding on to their positions, hurting and protecting each other all the while. Shivan is a patient raconteur, getting us under the skins of

people and situations: Chandralal, the small-time thug, who rises to eminence through Daya's benevolence, his loyalty and avarice; Sriyani, a supportive human rights worker; the complex weaves that bring alive his mother Hema. In fact, he's so meticulous that, despite early indications, it's only towards the end of the book we realise with surprise what a negative, destructive, self-centred person he himself is, a ghost with the burden of past love, who balks at redemption through new love. It's as if Selvadurai holds a mirror to the reader who feels goodness and love, but is tainted with an unrecognised blemish that alienates and dooms.

In his relationships with two countries, his mother and sister, most of all his grandmother, his two great lovers — the Sri Lankan Mili whose cruel loss shatters him and separates him from his grandmother, and Michael who patiently tries to ride his tantrums — it's clear that however deep your love for another, demons are waiting to claim you. Finally, as it happens in this case, love is left bleeding at its own altar.

“ IT'S AS IF SELVADURAI HOLDS A MIRROR TO THE READER, WHO FEELS GOODNESS AND LOVE, BUT IS TAINTED WITH A BLEMISH THAT ALIENATES AND DOOMS.



THE HUNGRY GHOSTS
Shyam Selvadurai
Viking
2013, pp 371
₹ 599

just out

THE HUNGRY GHOSTS,

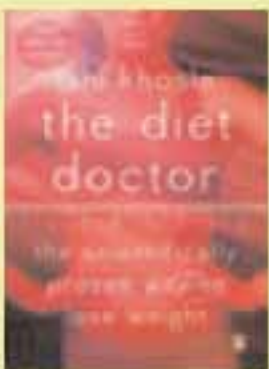
By Shyam Selvadurai, Penguin Books, ₹599, pp 372



Moving between Toronto and war-torn Sri Lanka of the 1980s and '90s, *The Hungry Ghosts* tells an intense and absorbing story of one man's restless search for redemption. Shivan Rassiah, gay and in his early thirties, prepares to return from Canada to his dying grandmother in Sri Lanka. Much is riding on this trip for Shivan, who hopes it will bring him the renewal he so desperately needs.

THE DIET DOCTOR,

By Ishi Khosla, Penguin Books, ₹250, pp 215



Want to learn to lose weight in a controlled, easy and scientifically sound way and keep it off? Then it's time to junk the latest trends and go back to the basics with *The Diet Doctor*. Ishi Khosla, who has worked with the Escorts Heart Institute and Research Centre as well as food majors advising them on nutrition, now tells you what and how much to eat to lose the weight you want — just as a nutritionist would.

THE WAY OF THE KNIFE

By Mark Mazzetti, Penguin Books, ₹499, pp 379



The USA has been waging a new kind of war across the world against Islamic extremism. It is a shadow war that is spreading from Pakistan and Afghanistan into Yemen and Africa, where the next phase of battle has begun. The CIA has become, more than ever, a paramilitary agency, ordered by the White House to kill off its enemies.



Haunted by the homeland

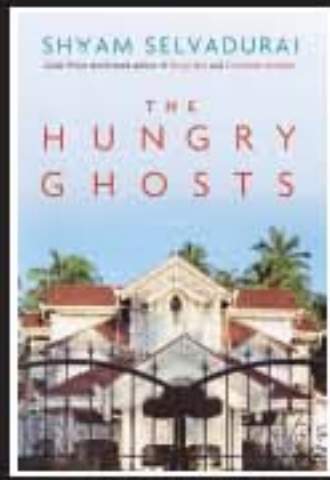
By Biswadeep Ghosh

THE dead do not die. "Like a leopard stalking its prey through tall grass, a man's past life pursues him, waiting for the right moment to pounce." The theme of Sri Lankan-Canadian author Shyam Selvadurai's (inset) latest novel *The Hungry Ghosts* originates from this fragment of Buddhist myth. Selvadurai was born to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father, the two ethnic groups that were locked in an acrimonious conflict in Sri Lanka. In the early 80s, the family was compelled to migrate to Canada. Having experienced an atmosphere of uncertainty, more so because of his mixed parentage, the author's personal history resonates in his writings.

The Hungry Ghosts is an intense novel. Selvadurai's crisp and lucid prose talks to the reader, inviting him to immerse himself in the world of the narrator-protagonist. Shivan, who is both gay and of mixed parentage like the author himself, leaves his wounded homeland for Canada along with his family. The unfortunate circumstances of the exodus notwithstanding, the author avoids any indulgence in detailed descriptions of the conflict's far-reaching consequences. Shivan doesn't turn his eyes away from the strife as if nothing exists. But he doesn't walk past dead bodies or escape death either.

The novel is primarily about a man's growing up amidst a civil war in Sri Lanka followed by changes in his life in distant Canada. While in Sri Lanka, he has to reconcile with the fact that he is sexually 'different' which is unacceptable in a country where rights and wrongs are defined by a set of inflexible primitive rules. He has endured the discomfort of having to hear contempt-laden remarks about his Tamil father. His grandmother is domineering, almost tyrannical, "a woman who had others carry things for her." His mother, having married a Tamil man, has to suffer the misfortune of early widowhood. Shivan sees it all, feels it all.

Selvadurai's critics might insist that his creative imagination is subservient to the circumstances of his own life. While the argument has its



THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

BY SHYAM SELVADURAI,
PENGUIN VIKING ; ₹599



merits – the line separating fact from fiction is hazy indeed – the author's interpretation of familiar situations is quite remarkable. Shivan's sexuality is a foible in his country of birth. When he returns to Sri Lanka later in life, he would deal with an emotional setback he had never imagined he would. In Canada, he doesn't take long to realise that being an Asian gay man is different from his local white counterpart.

With a gay man at the centre of the narrative, the novel tells the story of three generations of a Sinhalese family.

After a serious assault on her dignity during her days of youth, his grandmother metamorphoses into a lady with a dictatorial mindset. During his visit later, Shivan also realises that she can be corrupt and cruel without any moral inhibitions. His mother's rebellion against her mother is followed by her struggle for survival in Canada. Unhappiness seems to chase Shivan wherever he goes. Bad deals in life are all he has seen and known.

The Hungry Ghosts makes for disturbing reading. Selvadurai writes beautifully, but he tells a story with hardly any genuinely bright moment. The stray ray of light is an illusion, and darkness, an invader we expect. Not everything is right with the world: that's the message the author conveys with a sad and powerful story. However, should you believe that the observation is correct – and there is no reason why you should not – the ghosts in the novel will haunt you for a long time.