

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

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

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**THE HUNGRY GHOSTS**  
By Shyam Selvadurai,  
Viking, Rs 599

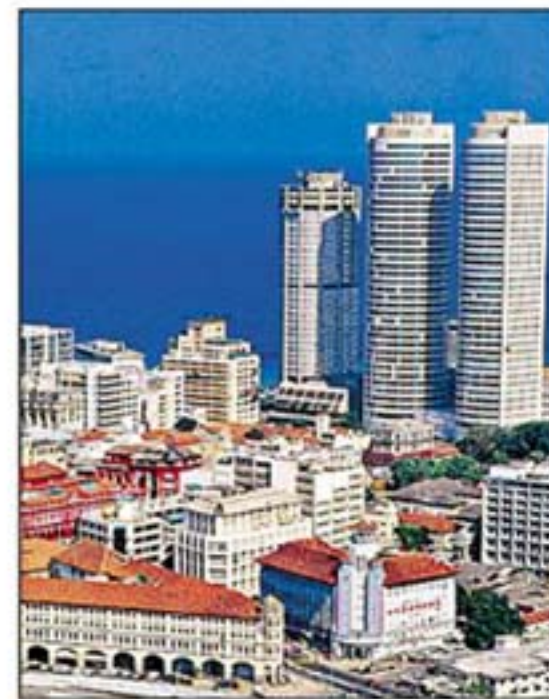
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# Difficult demons

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”.

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



Colombo, Sri Lanka

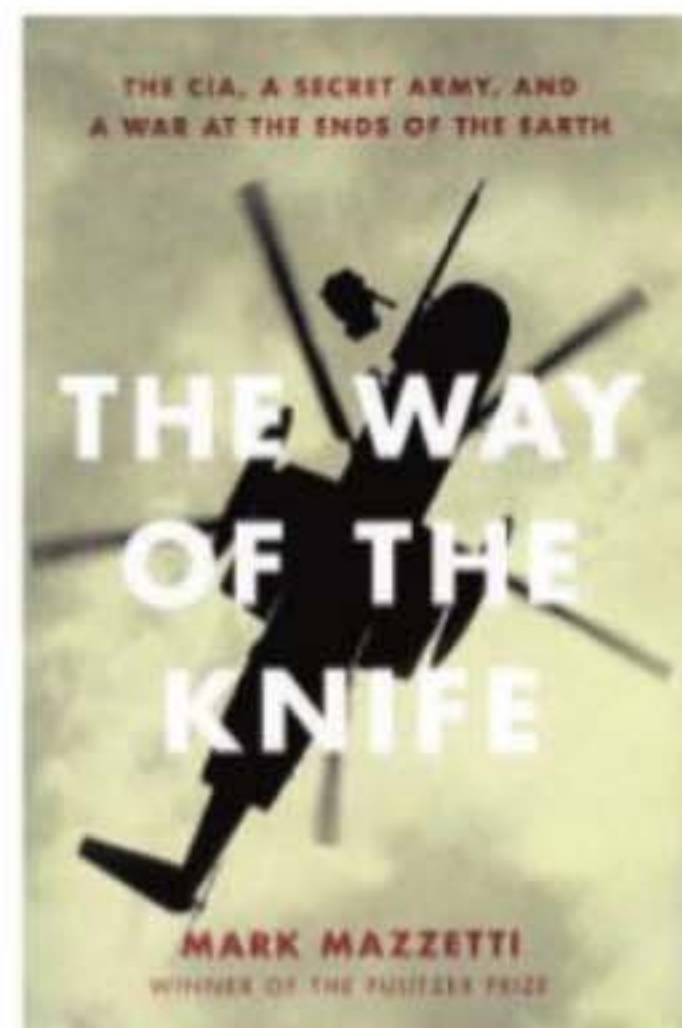
same images and phrases puts too much emphasis on the metaphor in the title; it is as though Selvadurai is worried that his readers might miss the point.

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

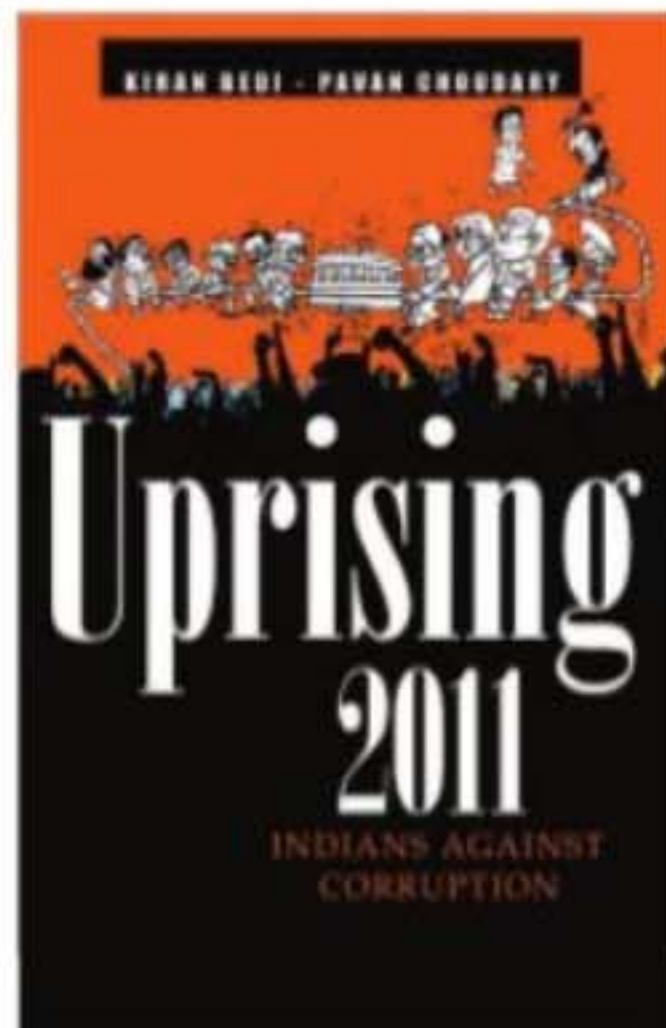
By: Mark Mazetti

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 Choudhary

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

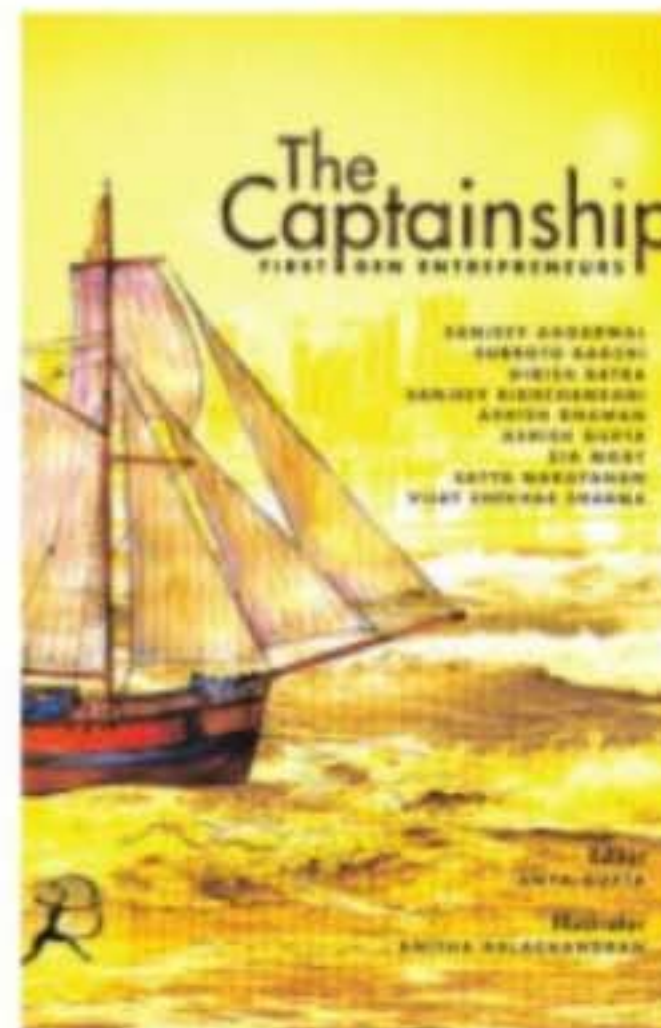
By: Shyam Selvadurai

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

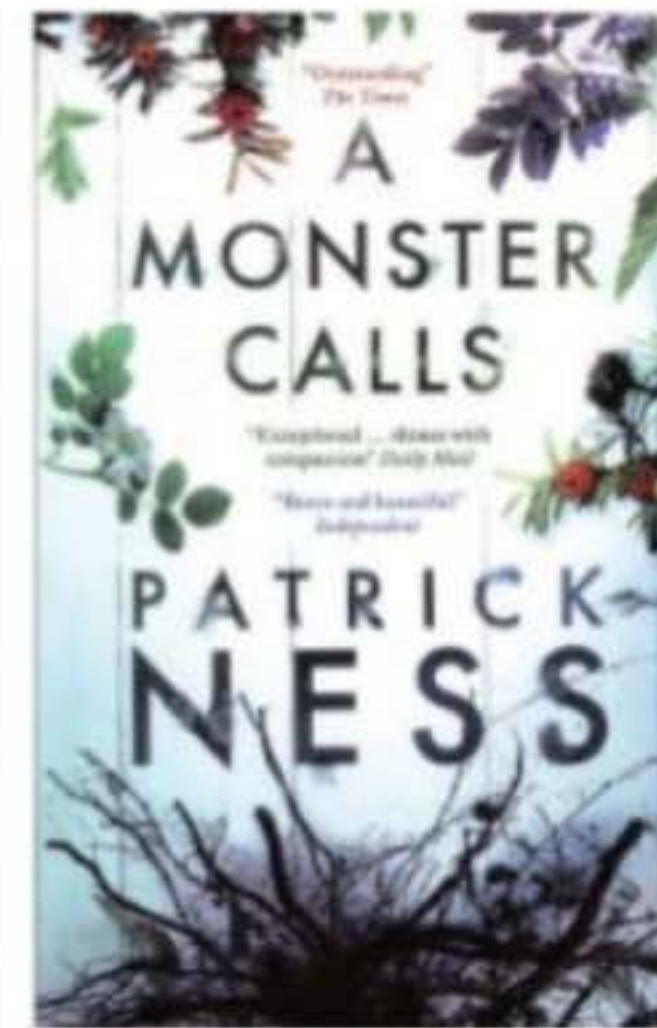
By: Anya Gupta (Ed)

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

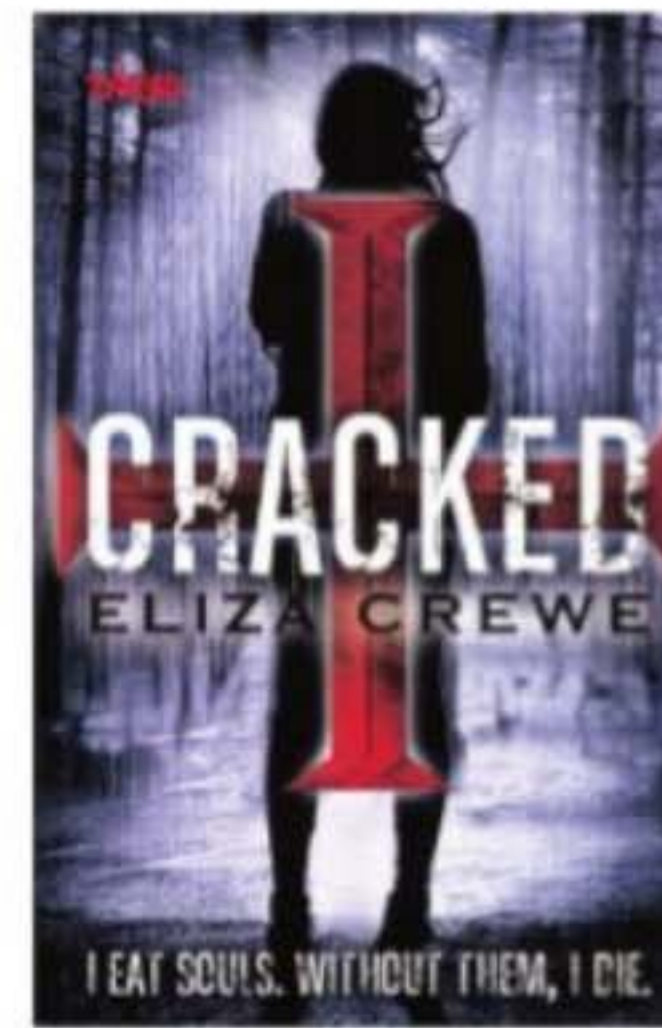
By: Patrick Ness

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

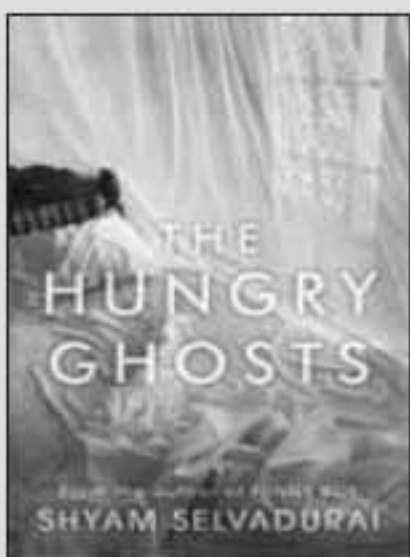
Price: ₹250

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

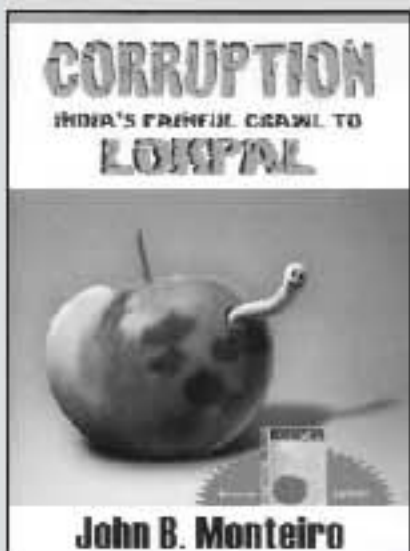
### The Hungry Ghost



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.

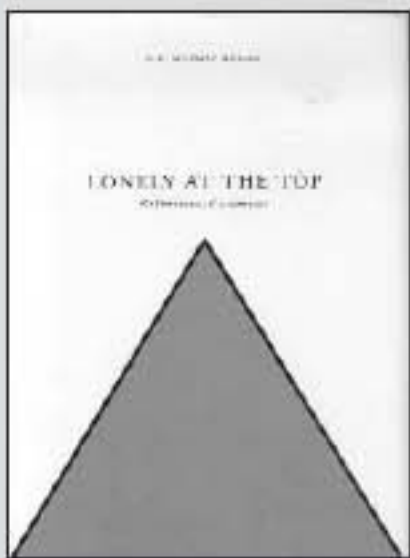
### Corruption – India's Painful Crawl to Lokpal



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

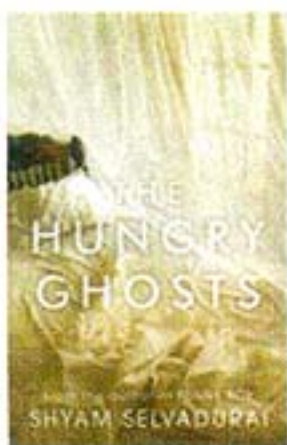
*Lonely at the Top* is about leaders and the challenges they face as they walk alone. This edited anthology contains the reflections of a seasoned Mentor, on the leadership dilemmas of the CEO in a turbulent and unpredictably changing world. With examples and experiences, the author indicates, sometimes 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 Ressiah, 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 Ressiah 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

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.





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.**

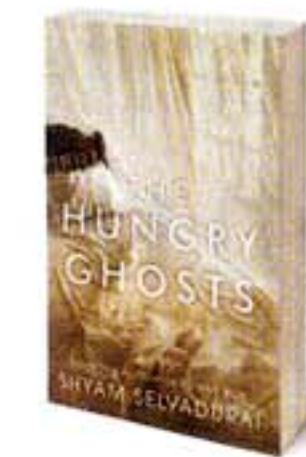
I meant religion in general, not just Buddhism. Well, what can I say? To start with, I’m not a “joiner”, to use a North American term. I don’t like congregating and praying together and particularly don’t like the basement social after with cookies and coffee. Then there is the homophobia, the sexism, 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**

**A**t 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, shimmering 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 baulks 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,**

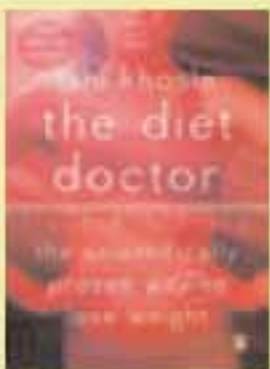
**By Shyam Selvadurai, Penguin Books, ₹599, pp 372**



**M**oving 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**



**W**ant 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**



**T**he 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.



Illustration: ARYA PRAHARAJ



# Haunted by the homeland

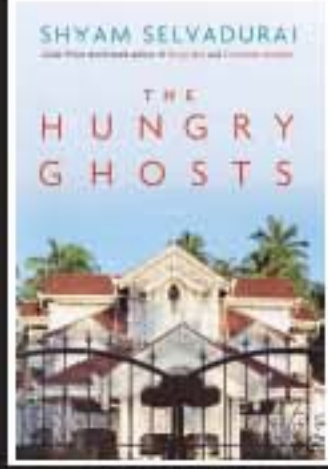
By Biswadeep Ghosh

**T**HE 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.





# Haunted by the weight of the past, Sri Lanka to Canada

Though accomplished, SHYAM SELVADURAI's third novel is steeped so deeply in the narrator's belief in destiny that it becomes a depressing read at times, writes SHARANYA MANIVANNAN.

## REVIEW

SHYAM SELVADURAI

### THE HUNGRY GHOSTS



#### The Hungry Ghosts

Shyam Selvadurai  
Penguin Viking  
Pages: 384  
Price: Rs 599

In the Buddhist folklore of Sri Lanka, a *perethaya* is a type of supernatural entity condemned to a permanent, insatiable hunger through sins of greed in a previous birth. They lurk at crossroads and outside what had once been their own homes, unable to have their fill of anything of sustenance. Only in adulthood does Shivan Rassiah, the narrator of Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*, come to realise that the naked *perethi* of his grandmother's stories is a reflection of how she perceives herself and her own life. Though surrounded by good fortune, she is denied, or withholds — through her own actions — her pleasure in any of it.

As an adolescent, Shivan is his grandmother's beloved pawn. Widowed early, his mother is forced to return to her mother's home with her two young, half-Tamil chil-

dren in tow. Here, unable to understand the power dynamics of this arrangement yet compelled by his advantages within it, Shivan

plays cat's cradle between manipulative grandmother and resigned mother, without grasp of the consequences. Karma is the novel's key theme: we pay for the sins of this lifetime as well as those that came before it, even if those sins were unintentional or without comprehension of their being sins at all. The wealthy grandmother is a landlord, with a thug — Chandralal — to do her bidding, and considers Shivan her only heir. He is to her, as she tells him often, "like rain soaking a parched land".

When communal tensions rise in Sri Lanka and foreign embassies begin to offer expedited migration to Tamils fleeing the country, Shivan sees an opportunity — though he does not himself quite understand why he wants to leave. Together with his sister Renu and his mother, he moves to Canada as a teenager. Here, he comes to terms — concurrently — with his homosexuality and his brown-ness. The manner in which Selvadurai deals with questions of migration is both honest and unusual in its relative dullness. He does not romanticise (or indulge in nostalgia about) the motherland to a point of overwhelm. The Rassiahs slip into immigrant life as it exists in the practical world. The children grow up as lower middle class children everywhere grow up, and do well with their access to Western academia, and the mother mellows into a calm-

ly liberal lifestyle. Sri Lanka is not an obvious spectre, though every life — the novel fundamentally proposes — is a haunted one.



Shyam Selvadurai

ly liberal lifestyle. Sri Lanka is not an obvious spectre, though every life — the novel fundamentally proposes — is a haunted one.

The novel opens with Shivan preparing to go to Sri Lanka for the first time in many years. His grandmother is poised to die after a series of strokes, and both practical needs and the needs of destiny — particularly the needs of absolution — require his return. Shivan contemplates the turns his life has taken and the memories he has thus acquired. The most traumatic among them, as well as the most beautiful among them, both come from his last visit to

*The protagonists know that there are consequences, yet they cannot help but allow the actions that result in them. Willingly or without thought, they perpetrate — and are punished, equally, by cosmic law and self-limitations. Shivan's intractable and voracious grandmother's hold over him is so complete as to be aggravating.*

the country as a very young adult. In his early 20s, on a brief holiday, Shivan fell in love with a former schoolmate, the gorgeous Mili, a young political activist. While Mili was defying his role as a Cinnamon Gardens

scion, Shivan was ironically coming into his own as his grandmother's heir — becoming drawn into her corrupt, bullying power nexus. Then tragedy struck, and horror at what he believes to be his own implicated posi-

tion sent a grieving Shivan back to Canada so devastated that he severed meaningful ties with his family for years.

Eventually, he reconnects with his mother and Renu, and even finds a happy relationship with a young man named Michael. But he keeps the secret of his dark past — which he is unable to understand is in fact not his fault at all — from his partner, until the cost of withholding it becomes greater than the burden of bearing it.

Coming from the author of the searing *Funny Boy*, *The Hungry Ghosts* is certainly well-written, but it is also a depressing, sometimes difficult book. The inescapability of destiny is something the narrator believes in to such an extent that in many ways, the novel itself becomes like one of those cautionary tales his grandmother raised him on.

The protagonists know that there are consequences, yet they cannot help but allow the actions that result in them. Willingly or without thought, they perpetrate — and are punished, equally, by cosmic law and self-limitations. Shivan's intractable and voracious grandmother's hold over him is so complete as to be aggravating. Even at the end of her life, well into his own adulthood, he is beholden to her in a way he does not even comprehend. Selvadurai ends the book at an intriguing point — Shivan is about to return to confront his grandmother and become her caretaker, believing it to be fated, running away from his present by running toward his past. The reader is left demanding a sequel. Just like in the fables sprinkled through the book, if not in this one then in the next — in that book, perhaps, there will be redemption.



# Autobiography of a feeling

An evocative blend of history, politics and religion that negotiates immigrant anxieties with love and longing for the homeland.

**SHELLEY WALIA**

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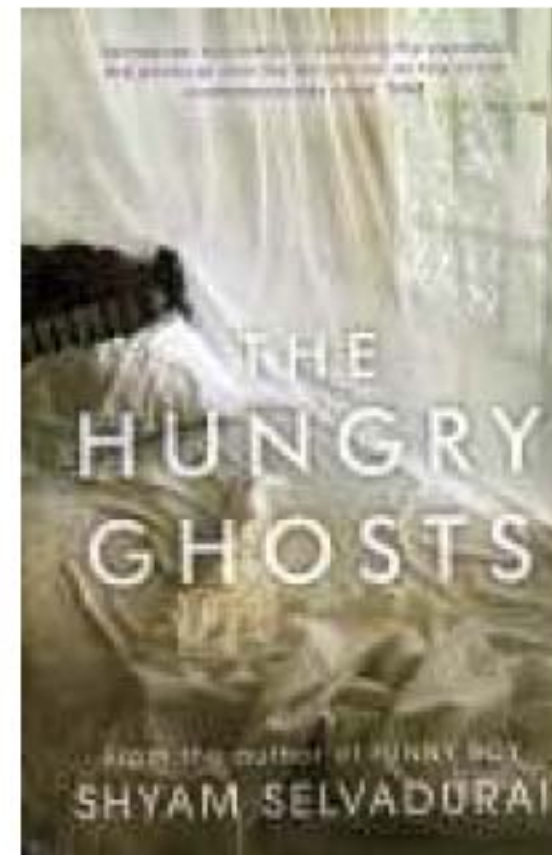
hyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* is a non-linear novel of dislocation moving from Colombo to Toronto and Vancouver with the gay protagonist, Shivan Rassiah, going through the travails of shedding the painful memories of his turbulent past in Sri Lanka, a past where he seems almost consumed by the obsessive love of his grandmother. The intention in the novel is not to mount a defence of diasporal space but to focus on constructions of identity and culture, on the contradictory voices within transglobal locations. The existence of spectacular subcultures, of migrants, of asylum seekers, continually opens up those surfaces to other potentially subversive readings. But there is no one moment for studying this.

People have moved across spaces through history. There seems to be no cultural sanctity left any more and the agitated quest for home and belonging continues. However, the diasporic state throws up an opportunity to think through some of the vexed

questions concerning religion and politics, belonging and distance, insider and outsider space. It would, therefore, be an appropriate point of departure to take up these issues and examine the immigrant who corrupts the purity of a cultural ethos and at the same time contributes to the idea of multiculturalism and plurality. In this context, it is clear that cultural difference is essentially ambivalent, liminal, and full of ironies and aporias.

Selvadurai knits a Buddhist myth into the narrative of his story by borrowing the idea that the dead can be born as hungry ghosts if born greedy in their present life, devoured by an unquenchable desire to possess land, wealth along with an authoritative control over people, a reflection of the struggle for power visible in the nightmare of Sri Lanka's

“I seem bleached out, as if my skin has developed a greyish undertone over the course of the night. But there is also a calm within me now, the inner stillness of someone who has finally given up, who has stopped clinging to the ridiculous notion that he, or any of us really, can avoid our fate.



**The Hungry Ghosts; Shyam Selvadurai, Penguin, Rs.599.**

Tamil and Sinhalese havoc. The deeply personal with all its raw human longing is underpinned by the tragedy of the nation. The grandmother's love is of the 'hungry ghost' seen in the common human desire to smother our dear ones, an emotion literally depicted in the turmoil in Sri Lanka that is brought about by the love and struggle for one's nation state.

The novel stands out as an evocative blend of history, politics and religion negotiating immigrant anxieties with love and longing for the homeland. Shivan plans to return to Colombo to rescue his grandmother from the rundown house she now resides in and which had been once her

pride. But within his heart there is the deep struggle to get rid of the hungry ghosts that haunt him from the past. He is in a state of disaffection both with the country of his residence and his motherland, which he is at pains to accept in its present state of turmoil. As Selvadurai argues, "Shivan cannot find happiness, and he can't let go, or accept. You can't just leave your past behind, but rather you must come to terms, incorporate, and absorb your karmic past. But, this is a human condition not just a Shivan condition.... If you've inherited certain things, you have to come to terms with what you've inherited. Free will is how you deal with what you're given, but you can't escape what happens to you. You must find a way to deal with it."

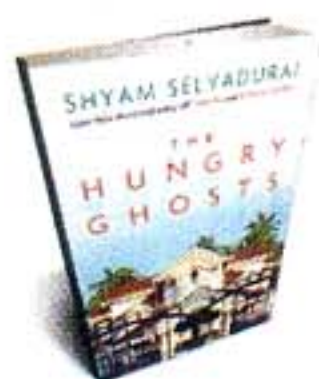
Past transgression can bring about spiritual drawbacks that bind future outcomes. Having faced the tragedy of the death of his gay lover at the hands of his 'hungry' grandmother who is completely devastated to know about the sexuality of her only heir, Shivan migrates to Toronto. His whole existence is to shed the burden of history and though he tries to find solace in a new relationship with a man, he realises that it is impossible to overcome one's karma.

**FICT**



# Fables For The Ghosts

**A stricken identity, the pains of gay love, an unhappy escape, a bleeding homeland: an insightful novel**



## THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

by Shyam Selvadurai

Penguin Viking | 371 pages | ₹599

by **Vijay Nambisan**

**T**HE one problem with this well-written and well-structured book is that the main characters, save one, are not very likeable. It is a harsh novel, and the people are real people, and a good novelist—as Selvadurai is—has the knack of bringing you into sympathy with his mind-born creations in far fewer than 371 pages; and yet for me, at least, there is a spark missing. It would be different had I been gay. Most of my gay friends, too, have had harsh lives in one way or another, and bear the scars.

*The Hungry Ghosts* is an NRI story, except that the protagonist is Sri Lankan. Shivan Rassiah had a Tamil father, dead before the tale begins. This makes him—and his mother and sister—particularly unfortunate victims of the Lankan ‘troubles’, because they owe no real allegiance to either side. This is especially so when the Sinhala side is represented by his mother’s mother, an unpleasant matriarch. The family’s escape to Canada taints everyone involved.

The grandmother, Daya Ariyasinghe, is one of the two characters who dominate Shivan’s life. The other is Mili Jayasinghe, from upper-crust Cinnamon Gardens, an old schoolmate who comes to exert a powerful emotional pull on Shivan long after their parting.

Mili is the one who brings enchantment to the tale. All their stories, and those of Shivan and his family, are told against—no, within—the turmoil of Lankan life in the 1980s and ’90s. Really, few novels I have read since *The Invisible Man* have made so well the point that the personal is political.

Shivan’s difficulties, like those of anyone who lives by his mind and emotions, are largely born of his personality. (There is a good contrast here with Chandralal, the thug who becomes a political heavyweight, and owes his rise to the grandmother.) He made use of his grandmother, but she also made use of him. She is one of the ghosts he strives to exorcise. This is where I really can empathise with Shivan: he can always find an excuse, and a rational one, for the other fellow’s actions. In grandmother’s case, there are two flashbacks: one told by the unkind, one told by herself.

Selvadurai is such a good craftsman that I hesitate to say here that the last section of the novel, set mainly in Vancouver, does not quite live up to the story. Everything up to there is well done, notably the scenes of violence; their covering up; Shivan’s first gay encounter; and the drawing of all the characters, in particular Mili and the grandmother. They are antitheses, Good and Bad, or so you think until you read the fine print. For Mili

**This is also a cry from the heart for what Lanka has become. It has given blood, but ghosts of the past feast on the soul.**



has his class background to atone for, Daya her past not to.

The writing is full of insights, tossed off in passing. When the young Shivan is gifted some novels by European and Asian writers: “It had never crossed my mind that anyone but British and American people wrote novels.” And in Canada, his comments on both immigrants and hosts, and the way they relate, are pretty acute.

The unique part of *The Hungry Ghosts* is that Selvadurai uses the Buddhist fables told by grandmother to wonderful effect. There is a point to every story that is reflected in Shivan’s story. Especially powerful is the tale the activist Ranjini tells, about how Lord Buddha taught his vain cousin Rupananda a lesson on beauty. These tales round out the novel. You could even say Lord Buddha, or the spiritual life he represents, is one of the ghosts of the title, but not one which needs exorcism.

The novel as a whole is also a bitter cry from the heart for what Sri Lanka has become. As the activist-teacher Sriyani tells Shivan, “You wanted poor old Sri Lanka to love and accept the person you became in Canada. But it cannot.” However, the truth is Sri Lanka could never accept Shivan even before his emigration. So Shivan is doomed to be a nowhere man, and it is he who has to accept the fact.

In ancient Greece, the ghosts of the dead—especially those killed in war or by deceit—were always thirsty, and could only be appeased with fresh blood. Sri Lanka has given freely of blood, but the ghosts of the past continue to feast on the soul. ■



# Spectres of Alienated Selves

*Shyam Selvadurai's The Hungry Ghosts respects the silences and boundaries that govern relationships* By **SUMANA MUKHERJEE**



If *The Hungry Ghosts* was set in contemporary times, instead of an unspecified period stretching back from the early 1990s, protagonist Shivan Rassiah's relationship status on Facebook would have undoubtedly read "It's complicated". Just how complicated? Consider this: The significant other in his life is not a girlfriend or boyfriend but his grandmother-from-hell. The baggage is only a couple of generations old but the resonances go back centuries, to the foundations of Buddhism and its belief in *peréthayas* (the origin being the Sanskrit *preta*), the hungry ghosts of the title, who desired too much in life and are dissatisfied in death.

In a way, the invocation is ironical because Toronto-based, Sri Lanka-born author Shyam Selvadurai is nothing if not ambitious in this, his third novel for adults. The epic tale is spun out with a sense of languor, spanning countries and cultures, ethnic conflict and emigrant angst, sexual orientation issues and activist propaganda. And through it all, malevolent and manipulative (and yes, inevitably, misunderstood) looms the shadow cast by Daya Ariyasinghe, dowager of Colombo, owner of vast acres of residential property and Shivan's grandmother.

The characterisation of Daya is more crucial than that of the narrator, Shivan, and it is a task Selvadurai accomplishes with finesse. In keeping with his show-not-tell style of narration, he uses the barest of physical descriptions — we learn from throwaway details that she is thin, bony and likes wearing starched saris — to create a monster of a woman, twisted and warped by time and circumstance, capable of intense love yet condemned to a distorted expression of it. Daya is deeply damaged by the time we encounter her through her grandson but, long before he puts together her backstory, we begin to appreciate — and abhor — her financial cunning and emotional coldness.

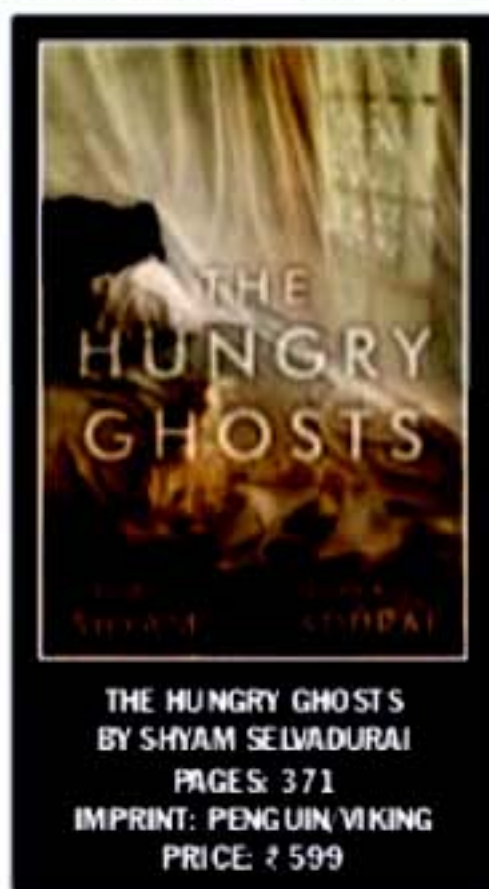
On the other side of this troubled equation is Shivan. Returning to his

grandmother's household after his rebel mother is widowed at 29, the boy recognises early, if subconsciously, that this relationship will be forged based on her wealth and his beauty. In the unarticulated manner of the very young who are anxious to protect their nearest, he offers himself up to Daya so that his mother and sister aren't turned out into the streets to become "beggars". After a particularly traumatic episode involving nail-studded footwear that ends with Shivan apologising to his Aachi, he understands "that my mother would not defend me anymore. She was no longer in control of our destiny. I was." Shivan is six.

Years later, when escalating Tamil-Sinhala violence offers the Rassiahs a chance to escape to Canada, Shivan masterminds the rupture with his shattered grandma. The Colombo mansion is replaced by a mean row house in Toronto, the school with university even as Shivan struggles to establish his gay identity. Ostensibly, they all move on with their lives but the tribulations endemic to immigrant life seem to be overshadowed by the op-

pressive personality of she who won't be left behind, even when distanced by 8,000 miles. A single attempt at reconciliation goes terribly wrong, fracturing Shivan further and alienating him in both the worlds he knows best.

Selvadurai positions his book at the cusp of a more hopeful, healing future for the Rassiahs but *The Hungry Ghosts* is curiously weighed down by the bleakness of its subject matter. Except for the somewhat self-conscious and disruptive moralisation of the *peréthaya* tales, Selvadurai's prose is fluid, but the protagonist's inner passivity and the lack of any real exploration of Daya's own agony prevent the novel from soaring into brilliance. For all its girth, *The Hungry Ghosts*' triumph lies in its respect of the silences and boundaries that govern relationships in this part of the world; it is in what is not said that the author's talent is most evident.





**R SRINIVASAN**

**F**rom the author of *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* comes the tale of Shivam Rassiah, his growing up years (at a time when tensions between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils were escalating) and his travelling between his native Sri Lanka and Canada. Shivam's mother had married a Tamilian against the wishes of her mother but after her husband's death due to financial constraints she is forced to return to her mother. She is initially not accepted by her mother but the ayah, who is wise in the ways of the world, knows that the grandmother's heart will melt if she were to see her grandson (Shivam) and allow them to stay at her place. Things go as planned and Shivam's grandmother accepts them.

In the first chapter, Shivam's grandmother's thoughtfulness and generosity shines through when he turns 13. As a birthday gift, she not only buys him an imported Raleigh 10-speed bicycle that he had been dropping hints about, but also the same colour and outfitted with an imported headlamp and pedals that glow in the dark. Later, when the sectarian violence seems like it might engulf them in view of his Tamil links, Shivam along with his mother and sister opts for fast-track immigration offered by Canada to Tamils who want to leave Sri Lanka. Even though hurt by their decision to leave her, Shivam's grandmother even buys him a house in Canada.

But the family does not find any peace in Canada. In a used bookstore Shivam finds a pamphlet that offers gays an opportunity to connect with members of their community or help them in coming to terms with their sexual ori-

**A lush, complex novel of migration, sexuality, family and exile, *The Hungry Ghosts* brings to life the author's native Sri Lanka and his adopted homeland Canada.**

# The Hungry Ghosts



**The Hungry Ghosts**  
Shyam Selvadurai  
Penguin Viking  
Pages: 371;  
Price: Rs 599

entation. Shivam's mother is forced to put up with an ignorant supervisor in the office who thinks "Third World people live in trees" and whose grammar and spelling are appalling. Such heartburn in the office extends to the home, angry evenings become routine, and they stop eating as a family.

Shivam has a complicated love-hate sort of relationship with his grandmother and even returns to Sri Lanka to meet her. Will his visit result in good? A common recurring theme in the book is that of karma whereby there is no escape from vile acts committed during one's lifetime and the myth of Perethaya or hungry ghost. As per the myth, a person who during his life span desires too much or is greedy is condemned to live the life of a Perethaya – hence its small mouth and large insatiable appetite.

War-torn Sri Lanka of the 1980s and '90s ensures mention of the role of the Indian Peace Keeping Force: "The Indian Peace Keeping Force, too, had met an ignoble death, becoming so unpopular that the old government had united with the Tigers to oust them from the country. The Indians had suffered a high number of casualties, but also stood accused of civilian massacres, disappearances and rapes".

All the characters are well etched-out and even the brief portrayal of Shivam's father shows him as a person who, due to circumstances, is unable to make a success of both his professional as well as personal life. Try as he might, even his efforts to win the affection of his wife or his children are in vain. The attractive hardbound cover entices, the book itself is well written and reveals the author's eye for the minutest of details.