3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies
Vol 30(3), September 2024 http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2024-3003-19

Have I Got Something to Tell You

Malachi Edwin Vethamani (Author)
Penguin Random House SEA, 2024
ISBN: 978-981-5144-85-7

Reviewed by:
CHUAH GUAT ENG
PhD, Novelist
guateng7@gmail.com

Since 2016 Professor Emeritus Malachi Edwin Vethamani, known for his bibliography and several anthologies of Malaysian literature in English, has established himself as a poet and short story writer with the publication of his own literary works. *Have I Got Something to Tell You* is his second collection of short stories. Of the twenty stories in the collection, all but three have been previously published; twelve in the first collection, *Coitus Interruptus* (Maya Press KL, 2018). The stories focus on the lives of Malaysians of Tamil ethnicity but cover a wide and varied range of topics, tones, and moods. For the sake of brevity and order, this review takes a slightly sociological approach, discussing the stories in relation to Vethamani's portrayal of the social group from which he draws his characters, and his depiction of how they see the world and their place in it.

Vethamani's fictional characters are predominantly from the minority Tamil community (about 7% of national population), but they are for the most part the English-educated, westernised or Christian, affluent professionals born and raised in Kuala Lumpur (KL), representing a subgroup within the minority. A significant aspect of his portrayal of this subgroup is its historical and cultural distance-distancing from the larger Tamil community. The stories bear no trace of the kind of narrative often found in writings by other Malaysian South Asian writers, about the first migrant-ancestor's arrival in Malaya-Malaysia or about the community's contributions to the country's prosperity. In "In Close Proximity", for instance, the "estate Tamil" is mentioned only as remote and implicitly shunned parts of the main character's childhood memories. The subgroup's links to their ancestral traditions and even language are equally tenuous. In "The Kiss" we are told, "Most choir members [of a Tamil church] could not read Tamil. They held the hymn books in front of them and pretended to sing" (p. 34). In "Ghosts", when a Christian man of the "flower power generation" decides he "wanted to be a Malaysian Indian. Not just a Malaysian" (pp. 218-9) he succeeds only in estranging his Christian wife and bewildering his son, whose name he changes from Michael to Ganesh.

The fictional settings reflect the subgroup's view of the world. The Malaysia presented is Malaysia as seen through the eyes of the English-educated, non-Malay, KL-ite characters described above. At its centre is KL, no longer surrounded by rubber estates, shanty towns, and toddy shops as in the past, but a metropolis surrounded by suburbs and residential areas clearly demarcated for the super-rich (Teluk Cempedak in "Sleeping Demon"), the affluent (Damansara in "Coitus Interruptus"), and the less affluent (an unnamed suburb in "The Desired One"). Outside KL the places the characters feel comfortable in, for studies or for holidays, are the non-Malay dominant cities and resorts: Penang, Seremban, Cameron Highlands and Port Dickson ("Rohan, Meg, and Lee"). If they move to smaller towns such as Banting ("In Close Proximity") and

Malacca ("Brother Felix's Ward") where the Malays have a stronger presence, it is because their career requires it. Visits to Kelantan and Terengganu, states governed by the Islamic party and therefore devoid of a "free flow of alcohol" ("Road Trip", p. 161), are to be postponed until such time as the lure of the local cuisine proves irresistible. In this conceptualisation of Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak do not exist. Neither do most of the country's history. The earliest historical event identified by date is the outbreak of interracial riots on May 13, 1969. In the two stories where this event is mentioned, the reader's attention is averted from the violence of the time and redirected to acts of perceived racial discrimination that occur years later: Lee's inability to get a place to study medicine in a local university in "Rohan, Meg, and Lee", and an ethnoreligious act of physical violence in "In Close Proximity". Apart from these few nods to the past, the stories are all set in the present, with references to smartphones, dating apps, Airbnb, Grab rides, Starbucks, and COVID-19 lockdowns.

The world beyond Malaysia reflects the characters' westernised and English-speaking perspective. It consists mainly of the Anglophone world, at the centre of which is the UK with its universities: Manchester ("Rohan, Meg, and Lee", p. 9), Sheffield ("The Good Daughter", p. 50), and the London School of Economics and Political Science ("Coitus Interruptus", p. 84). Surrounding the Anglophone world are the other European countries, where one is bound to feel linguistically "slightly handicapped" ("Beaten Twice", p. 153). Permeating this linguistically divided world is the supernatural realm, inhabited by spirits that can grant wishes but cannot transcend linguistic barriers. In "The Desired One" a wandering spirit in Malaysia hears, understands, and grants the wishes of two men, but in "Beaten Twice" the resident spirits of a cemetery in Rome fail to understand a Malaysian's English-spoken requests for permission to take photographs of the tombstones. Although treated here as macabre jokes, the Malaysian's attachment to the English language appears elsewhere to be a literary response to the national discourse on social harmony. In "The Gift of Silence", the ability to communicate in written English fosters a close bond between two boys, one of whom is deaf and mute. The role of English in enabling interethnic friendships and love is implied in four stories: between Rohan and Lee in "Rohan, Meg, and Lee", between Bala and Siew Heng, Rashidah, and Wahab in "In Close Proximity", between Sunitha and David Wong in "Coitus Interruptus", and between Surin and his "Malay guy" (p. 226) in "Sex and Politics in the Time of Lockdown".

Despite such suggestions of social harmony, none of the stories has what one might call a happy ending; they all end on a note of forlornness tinged with bitterness or irony. One reason for this may be that in all the stories, the important characters are outsiders, meaning people who have been identified - either by themselves or by others - as not belonging to a particular communal or traditional circle. There are different categories of outsiders in Vethamani's stories. One category is where the ostracising and the ostracised belong in different circles and are each other's outsider, e.g. Malek and Rama in "Drowning", and Brother Felix and Johan in "Brother Felix's Ward". A second category is where an individual is considered an outsider by their own circle because they do not fully conform to or with the circle's physical, moral, cultural, and behavioural norms, e.g. Appu-Dhakshina, the mute boy in "The Gift of Silence" and Periappa in "The Kiss". A third category is where an individual is an outsider by choice. Most of Vethamani's outsider characters fall into the third category. In "In Close Proximity", Bala's brother takes a stance of political outsiderness during the May 1969 riots, stating "… it doesn't concern us. It's between the Malays and Chinese. … Shut up and study" (p. 21). Eighteen years later, when Bala himself is the victim of an ethnoreligious assault, he passive-aggressively refuses to give the police information about his assailants: "He thought it was all a farce" (p. 29). In several stories, independent-minded

women choose to be outsiders to liberate themselves from traditional ideas of marriage (Akka in "The Good Daughter"; Sunitha in "Coitus Interruptus"; and Shanti in "Husband Material"). If a man's wish to remain forever young is interpreted as a vain desire to stand outside Time itself, then even the black-humoured "The Dastardly Twin" is a story of an outsider. The remaining eleven stories - just over half of the collection - feature gay men who fit into one or more of the three categories of outsiders described above: those who are made outsiders by others (straight or gay), and those who remain on the outside by choice.

The stories about gay men draw attention to themselves, partly because they are so numerous, but mostly because of their subject matter. To the extent that they often deal with things that take the reader out of their comfort zone, it is fair to surmise that they constitute a challenge to the mainstream view in Malaysia that gay people are marginal. This raises the question as to whether the author intends them to be treated as a separate category. The textual evidence seems to argue against it. In none of the stories is the gay character portrayed as either victim or hero; nor are those guilty of morally reprehensible behaviour allowed to go unpunished. In "Give Us This Day" a young gay man, Simon, is ostracised by both his straight family members and his gay friends for his drug habit and violent behaviour. In "Best Man's Kiss", the narrator, Annan, cuts off all ties from the devious and opportunistic Jason, once his lover and now his brother-in-law. And in "Sleeping Demon" the paedophiliac Manoh is kept resolutely at a distance by Nathan, a former victim-lover. The reader is thus implicitly guided to understand and judge gay characters, good or bad, as they would any other human being.

This "humanising" effect becomes more apparent when "gay" and "non-gay" stories with a similar theme or trope are read in tandem. A recurring figure is the gay man who is made an outsider by his lover's decision to return to the mainstream and marry a woman (Rohan in "Rohan, Meg, and Lee"; Ravimama in "Husband Material"; Annan in "Best Man's Kiss"; and Robert in "Callas and a Piece of Blue Cloth"). Variations on this theme include "Interloper", where a man learns he is no longer wanted in a gay threesome; and "Give Us This Day", where the elderly Larry is ill-treated and abandoned by Simon, his younger, drug-addict lover. Any sympathy one might feel for the gay men is balanced by the reminder in other stories that such break-ups also happen to straight men and women. In "Ghosts", it is the straight man, Michael-Ganesh, who becomes the outsider when his gay friend, Navin, decides to set up house with his lover, Siva. In "Husband Material", the narrator Shanti loses her boyfriend when he is forced into a traditionally arranged marriage. In this way, it can be said, the "gay" and "non-gay" stories work together and are unified by the theme of outsiderness.

What Vethamani chooses to write about and how he writes about them may not appeal to everyone, but through his stories, he brings to Malaysian literature in English not just a new voice but also new and varied ways of looking at the world. The general reader will find much to reflect on in his stories which are told in an easy, straightforward style. Students and more serious readers of local literature in English will find *Have I Got Something to Tell You* a rich source of material for research and consideration, especially from the perspective of cultural, gender, diaspora, or postcolonial studies.

REFERENCES

Vethamani, M. E. (2018). *Coitus Interruptus and Other Stories*. Kuala Lumpur: Maya Press.